

A childhood accident didn't impair James Thurber's comic vision

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Few younger Americans may know the name James Thurber, let alone his wonderful work and art. And that is a pity. Born on this day 126 years ago, Thurber was, from the late 1920s until his death in 1961, one of America's most popular humorists.

From his 426-word short story "**An American Romance**," which explored the kind of strained relationship that would serve as his literary quarry, to one of his best-known works, "**The Secret Life of Walter Mitty**," about a henpecked husband who disappears into a rich fantasy life of death-defying adventures, his elegant, precise, urbane writing style and squiggly cartoons became a staple of *The New Yorker* magazine.

My personal favorite, "**The Night the Bed Fell**," was a wildly exaggerated story about Thurber's strange childhood and family in Columbus, Ohio. By way of disclaimer, I played James Thurber in a high school production. Perhaps not as good as the 1960 Broadway production of "A Thurber Carnival," I, nonetheless, recall my recitation of "The Night the Bed Fell" as a genuine laugh riot.

And then there were the cartoons—weird, wobbly portrayals of husbands and wives arguing over all sorts of things, wonderful pictures of dogs, and many other creatures—always accompanied by even weirder and funny captions.

Less well-known about this minor genius of mirth was that he lost his left eye at the age of 6. Thanks to a **superb analysis** by Dr. James Ravin, published in the *Archives of Ophthalmology* in May 2002, we have a fairly clear medical history of Thurber's eye troubles and eventual blindness.

In 1900, Thurber's older brother, William, had just received a toy bow-and-arrow set as a gift and was eager to try it out. The 8-year-old William asked Jim to walk a distance away from him so that he might shoot him in the back. James was less than thrilled by this request but nonetheless followed the big brotherly command. William took so long in aiming that young Jim turned around to see what the delay was about, only to face an incoming arrow headed directly at his left eye. His parents took him to a local doctor, but when the symptoms worsened they consulted the Washington eye surgeon Swan Burnett. At that point, there was little to be done but to enucleate (i.e. remove) the damaged eyeball, followed by his wearing an eyepatch—and later a glass eye—as well as special magnifying glasses.

Soon after the accident, Jim developed an inflammation of his right-sided iris—the flat membrane that gives an eye its color and acts as an aperture allowing the eye to adjust to light and darkness. Jim also developed fluid-like pus, or exudation, over the right eye's lens surface—as a result of chronic inflammation—which only hampered his eyesight further. Ironically, such inflammation in the surviving eye after a penetrating injury to the other one is quite common. Doctors call the syndrome "sympathetic ophthalmia." His parents kept him from engaging in sports or strenuous activities and he grew ashamed of his visual impairment, which is why many photographs of him from their era show only his "good," right-sighted profile.

By 1937, when Thurber was 43, his blurred vision worsened to a dangerous degree, especially when driving his automobile at night and looking at the headlights of the oncoming traffic. He consulted a Columbia University–Presbyterian Hospital eye doctor named Gordon Bruce, who diagnosed a cataract and proposed a two-stage operation to remove a portion of the inflamed iris and then extract the cataract. If only it was that simple. Between 1940 and 1941, Thurber endured five eye operations, all of them followed by terrible bouts of postoperative iris inflammation, bleeding, scarring and glaucoma.

In 1941, his wife Helen described her husband's visual nightmare: "He cannot go out alone, has to be led around, except indoors, where he is very agile. And the worst is that he cannot read or draw. He writes in long hand on yellow paper but cannot see what he writes." Although a new set of magnifying glasses helped him somewhat, he spiraled down into a deep depression.

"I cracked up. I'm told most patients crack up from shock after the first such operation—and usually lesser operations than mine were. So, I had a pretty bad case of nerves," Thurber said of his mental state.

Thurber even went as far as to ask a close friend, the poet and literary critic Mark Van Doren, if his impending blindness was a "punishment" for the trivial writing he was so famous for: "I have done nothing but make fun of weakness and folly; wisdom, strength, goodness have never been my subjects as they ought to be for anybody—as they are for you. I have been pitiless, trivial, destructive. And now this trouble comes."

In the months that followed, he managed to conquer his depression. Buoyed by his wild imagination and a great deal of alcohol (Thurber was a prodigious drinker and angry and vindictive when drunk), he later mused, "Last night I dreamed of a small consolation enjoyed only by the blind: nobody knows the trouble I've not seen."

To Thurber's enduring credit as an artist, he created and wrote until he died. When drafting his cartoons, he used a special magnifying glass and drew on large sheets of paper. In a 1953 interview for the *Saturday Review of Literature*, Thurber optimistically described his writing process: "Today I have 6% vision at most. But blindness is only a challenge, not a handicap. In many ways it's actually an advantage for a writer. There are less distractions by useless reading, or a bird at the window, or a pretty girl passing by...I now am able to write complete stories in my head. I can remember a 3,500-word story without missing a punctuation mark."

His late masterpieces, such as "My World—and Welcome to It" (1942), "The Thirteen Clocks" (1950), and a superb account of the early days of the *New Yorker* magazine, "The Years with Ross" (1959), were all composed, edited, and published during this period— not to mention the many Thurber books, cartoon collections, and anthologies that were published after his death. Thurber may have complained of having "developed inflammation of the sentence structure and definite hardening of the paragraphs," but his prolific output outlasted him. He died on Nov. 2, 1961 of pneumonia, following surgery to remove a blood clot to his brain, one month before his 67th birthday.

Blindness could not squelch Thurber's ingenuity. As he confessed to the legendary *New Yorker* scribe E.B. White, "I write humor the way a surgeon operates, because it is a livelihood, because I have a great urge to do it, because many interesting challenges are set up, and because I have the hope it may do some good."

By – **Dr. Howard Markel**

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