James Thurber's casuals: the most interesting uninteresting characters in American literature

Os casuais de James Thurber: os personagens desinteressantes mais interessantes da literatura americana

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ABSTRACT: The American James Thurber (1894-1961) is known for creating imaginative and comical characters. The two stories selected for appreciation, "The Departure of Emma Inch" and "Casuals of the Keys" feature some of the most engaging and bizarre characters of the twentieth century. The objective is to make a presentation of these characters intermingled with a discussion on the theoretical background behind their creations, from the literary devices and allusions used in Thurber's narrative to the philosophical perspectives on character realism. The examination of the two short stories hopefully boasts contribution to the understanding of the workings of both human and animal characters in Thurber's writings. It also seeks to assist with the understanding of how fictional realism, biographical studies (including autobiographical attributes), and tall tales can be used to be both informative and amusing.

Keywords: James Thurber. "The Departure of Emma Inch". "Casuals of the Keys". Characters. Tall tales.

ABSTRACT: O americano James Thurber (1894-1961) é conhecido por criar personagens imaginativos e cômicos. As duas histórias selecionadas para apreciação, "The Departure of Emma Inch" e "Casuals of the Keys" apresentam alguns dos personagens mais envolventes e bizarros do século XX. O objetivo é fazer uma apresentação desses personagens intercalada com uma discussão sobre o contexto teórico por trás de suas criações, desde os recursos e alusões literárias usados na narrativa de Thurber até perspectivas filosóficas sobre o realismo dos personagens. O exame dos dois contos espera auxiliar na compreensão do funcionamento tanto de personagens humanos quanto animais nos escritos de Thurber. Busca-se também contribuir para a compreensão de como o realismo ficcional, estudos biográficos (incluindo atributos autobiográficos), e contos fantásticos podem ser usados para serem, ao mesmo tempo, informativos e divertidos.

Palavras-chave: James Thurber. "The Departure of Emma Inch". "Casuals of the Keys". Personagens. Contos fantásticos.

Introduction

James Thurber (1894-1961) is famous for his humor, for his drawings, for his characters with a fantastic imagination, for his quarrelsome couples, and for a variety of themes that stem from his exotic wit. He may have written some of the quirkiest, the most bizarre, the most idiosyncratic characters of the twentieth century in American fiction. Most of them are featured in his short stories. Many of these short stories are originally published in the *New Yorker* magazine and later collected into amazing anthologies that are necessary items in every respectable library. A selection of these unique characters is explored in the present analysis. They are ushered in the context of the narrative that introduces them, with some background to help readers understand

and cherish more these *sui generis* fictional individuals. A discussion of the reality of characters ensues, bringing tangentially the points of view of philosophy, cognitivism, anti-cognitivism, fictional realism and biographical studies. Two short stories have been selected as corpus of investigation, namely: "The Departure of Emma Inch" and "Casuals of the Keys" (for their exquisite bouquet of outlandish characters).

Over the years, the subject of how to write compelling characters has been scrutinized to exhaustion, thus only highlights from its varied theoretical standpoints have been selected to help understand the workings of Thurber's fictional creations. Care is taken to avoid overlooking any character (from the selected corpus), thus even Feely, Emma Inch's dog, receives legitimate attention as a rightful member of the present literary character inspection roster.

The short story "The Departure of Emma Inch" is first published in the print edition of the August 10, 1935, issue of the *New Yorker*. The short story "Casuals of the Keys" is first published in the print edition of the May 7, 1932, of the same magazine. Both stories are later collected in the anthology *The Middle-Aged Man in the Flying Trapeze*, published by Harper & Brothers in 1935.

"The Departure of Emma Inch"

Emma Inch is a strong contender for the title of quirkiest character ever to come out from Thurber's prolific pen. Counterintuitively, she is first presented with the main characteristic of being utterly forgettable:

> Emma Inch looked no different from any other middle-aged, thin woman you might glance at in the subway or deal with across the counter of some small store in a country town, and then forget forever. Her hair was drab and unabundant, her face made no impression on you, her voice I don't remember--it was just a voice (Thurber, 1935, p. 17).

Thurber makes use of the effective strategy of the 'calm before the storm'; the reliable writerly device of stunning the reader with the unexpected. He begins by preparing the reader for a forgettable experience only to swiftly enhance the contrast to reach the shock factor, bewildering the reader with one of the most unforgettable encounters in literature. To Fabb (2023, p. 1): "Surprise can in some cases result in various kinds of arousal, and can have epistemic effects, including the feeling of coming

to know something not just new but also profound and perhaps ineffable". Surprise is one of the literary universals (perhaps because the psychology behind the surprise is a human universal). Fictional texts containing surprises are found in the literature of many nations around the world.

Simultaneously, Thurber makes use of the setup and payoff dynamic in the initial description of Emma Inch. The setup seems uneventful and dull (creating low expectations in the reader). The payoff is alluring and fascinating (creating enough disparity and surprising the reader) on the following pages. This demonstrates a deep understanding of the mechanics of sudden astonishment, a valuable resource of capable and gifted writers.

From a cognitive theoretical perspective, Meyer, Reisenzein and Schützwohl (1997, p. 251) state that "surprise is elicited by events that deviate from a schema". According to schema theory, Thurber prepares the reader setting up the (apparently) consolidated knowledge of Emma Inch's irrelevance, which is in turn incorporated into the reader's schema dedicated to the character. What is brought into the reader's perception is, in accordance with cognitive precepts, transformed into generalized knowledge that will be formulated as schemata. Although there is a built-in tolerance mechanism that allows for certain variation, since: "no cat is the perfect instantiation of a cat and no two cats are identical" (Fabb, 2023, p. 1) surprise is elicited when events (or sequences of events, or even objects) significantly deviate from a schema created *a priori*. The deviant schema strategy used by writers is different from the strategy of distraction prior to a surprise (distraction makes use of different perceptual tools and cognitive mechanisms). In sum, a surprise, literary or not, is a response to something unexpected that can, with any possible grouping of items, be prepared and executed by a character, the plot, and/or the narrator.

Thurber is using the narrator to lay out the grounds for what comes next. The main character is presented firstly with characteristics regarding her appearance, and secondly, her voice. There is no behavior set up as yet (working already arranged via pre-formulated schemata), thus, it is *not* the case that:

> Literary characters can surprise us by behaving in ways which contradict the knowledge which we formulate about them, and our surprise may be enhanced into a more profoundly felt experience if we also empathize with the characters (with empathy enhanced by literary devices) (Fabb, 2023, p. 1).

At the time being, there can be no pre-formulated conception of behavior (since the reader has not had the chance of being exposed to any of the character's movements at this early point of the story). The lack of action up to this point does not provide much for the reader to develop in terms of empathy either (unless a very sensitive reader has already started cultivating feelings of compassion or commiseration in reaction to such a drab, lackluster introduction).

Emma Inch's first contact with the other two main characters, *i.e.*, the couple, (the story is told through the eyes of the husband – the in-story Thurber character) is through a letter of recommendation written by some acquaintance who is aware of their plan to go to Martha's Vineyard for the summer. This unknown person also knows that the couple is looking for a cook, hence Emma Inch's recommendation. As far as the couple is concerned: "We took her because there was nobody else, and she seemed all right" (Thurber, 1935, p. 17).

The following information the reader receives is more of Emma Inch's physical description (of everything visible about her), and about her dog:

> Emma Inch had a big scuffed brown suitcase with her, and a Boston bull terrier. His name was Feely. Feely was seventeen years old and he grumbled and growled and snuffled all the time, but we needed a cook and we agreed to take Feely along with Emma Inch, if she would take care of him and keep him out of the way. It turned out to be easy to keep Feely out of the way because he would lie grousing anywhere Emma put him until she came and picked him up again. I never saw him walk. Emma had owned him, she said, since he was a pup. He was all she had in the world, she told us, with a mist in her eyes. […] I didn't see how anybody could love Feely (Thurber, 1935, p. 17).

The dog is an important part of the character, or at least her relationship with it is. The husband claims he does not lose any sleep over Emma Inch that night, clearly denoting seeing nothing askew about her. The wife, however, is the character that purportedly shares feelings with the reader. She claims she lost sleep over Emma Inch and her dog that night, stating that: "she felt kind of funny about them. She didn't know why. She just had a feeling that they were kind of funny" (p. 17). Describing what is wrong with the portrait painted by the narrator is a daunting and challenging task, perhaps because he (the narrator) is the husband who seems quite detached from the prospective cook. Had he been more empathetic about Emma, perhaps his description could have been more meticulous and comprehensive.

The following day the couple meets Emma right before departure from the hotel they are staying in. The wife asks if Emma has already packed, and Emma replies she did pack everything already except for the electric fan. She does not know the cabin they are all heading to has no electricity. Emma's discourse implies the necessity for an electric fan is paramount from her perspective. When she learns about the lack of electricity, she seems distressed: "She studied my wife's face. 'I'll have to think of something else then,' she said. 'Mebbe I could let the water run all night.' We both sat down and looked at her. Feely's asthmatic noises were the only sounds in the room for a while" (p. 18). At that point, Emma does not know the cabin has no running water either.

The reader then learns that the reason the electric fan is so important is that it keeps Feely in a light sleep overnight. Otherwise, its snores can wake up whoever is in the room with it (and perhaps in the adjacent rooms as well). Emma also leaves the light on overnight for the same reason. In the cabin, with no electricity, she would have to think of some alternative way of keeping Feely's snores under control.

The next thing the reader learns is that Emma Inch never answers the telephone, because she says she always gets a shock (prior to that she said she never sleeps in hotels either, because they burn down). Emma Inch's peculiarities irritate the husband a little bit; just enough to drive him to need a drink. Emma does not like taxis either. She hesitates before entering one to go to the pier and when she does, she strongly instructs the driver to go slow. Emma thinks all taxi drivers are drug addicts: "'They all take cocaine,' she said. Feely began to make a new sound--a kind of high, agonized yelp. 'He's singing,' said Emma. She gave a strange little giggle, but the expression of her face didn't change" (p. 19-20).

The giggle without changing the facial expression is a nice little writerly touch by Thurber. The husband's need for an alcoholic beverage only increases. The small but frequent circumstantial problems keep building:

> If Emma Inch had been afraid of the taxicab, she was terrified by the Priscilla of the Fall River Line. 'I don't think I can go,' said Emma. 'I don't think I could get on a boat. I didn't know they were so big.' She stood rooted to the pier, clasping Feely. She must have squeezed him too hard, for he screamed--he screamed like a woman" (p. 20).

Emma Inch finally boards the boat. And then another taxi to New Bedford and then yet another boat to finally reach Martha's Vineyard. The husband suspects the trip

is taking a toll on Emma, so he goes to check on her. He finds she is alright (alright for Emma's standards anyway); which is an interesting way of saying that the rules of what constitutes being alright for Emma does not correspond to what constitutes being alright for other people:

> She was all right, or at least all right for her, until five minutes before the boat reached the dock at Woods Hole, the only stop between New Bedford and the Vineyard. Then Feely got sick. Or at any rate Emma said he was sick. He didn't seem to me any different from what he always was--his breathing was just as abnormal and irregular. But Emma said he was sick. There were tears in her eyes. 'He's a very sick dog, Mr. Thurman,' she said. 'I'll have to take him home.' I knew by the way she said "home" what she meant. She meant Seventy-eighth Street" (p. 20).

The husband has doubts about the dog's (new, recently acquired) health condition. The passage shows for the first time the husbands name (Thurber's alias), Mr. Thurman[1]. Before reaching their destination, after the last boat, Emma Inch decides to take Feely back home to New York City. The husband tries to persuade her to stay, arguing about the healing properties of Martha's Vineyard and how everything is so nice over there, but to no avail. Emma Inch is categorical. She has already decided. Mr. Thurman explains that it is a long way back, that she would need to get into boats all over again, or else take the train, though she does not have any money. She says does not want money she has not earned, but Mr. Thurman eventually convinces her to accept some for the trip:

> […] then I gave her some money. I made her take it. […] Feely snaffled and gurgled. I saw now that his eyes were a little red and moist. […] 'How do you expect to get home from here?' I almost shouted at Emma Inch as she moved down the gangplank. 'You're way out on the end of Massachusetts.' She stopped and turned around. 'We'll walk,' she said. 'We like to walk, Feely and me.' I just stood still and watched her go" (p. 21).

To settle this ordeal Mr. Thurman chooses not to involve his wife, at least not at that moment, in those specific circumstances. He knows his wife would definitely consider (among other things) the dog's state and well-being, and conclude its health could be at stake. After the situation abates, the wife comes into play wanting to know what had happened:

[1] He has already used his *nome de guerre* Jacob Thurman on another short story previously (in "The Gentleman is Cold") in the same collection.

> When I went up on deck, the boat was clearing for the Vineyard. "How's everything?" asked my wife. I waved a hand in the direction of the dock. Emma Inch was standing there, her suitcase at her feet, her dog under one arm, waving goodbye to us with her free hand. I had never seen her smile before, but she was smiling now (p. 21).

And that is the last anyone sees of the strange and perplexing Emma Inch and her ailing dog. What is not previously mentioned (but perhaps should have been), is Feely's walking logistics. When Emma refuses to stay at the hotel the couple are staying in New York at the beginning of the story, she goes home that night – on foot, carrying Feely – and comes back – on foot, carrying Feely – the next day (the day of the departure). She had: "walked all the way, carrying Feely. It had taken her an hour or two, because Feely didn't like to be carried very far at a time, so she had had to stop every block or so and put him down on the sidewalk for a while" (Thurber, 1935, p. 19). One can now imagine Emma Inch walking approximately 266 miles (428 kilometers) back home, crossing at least two states – on foot, carrying Feely: "'You're way out on the end of Massachusetts.' She stopped and turned around. 'We'll walk,' she said. 'We like to walk, Feely and me.' I just stood still and watched her go" (p. 21). What can one do in a situation such as this?

Not infrequently, Thurber brings dogs to his humorous narratives. Feely may be one of the most memorable bull terrier in his fiction (so richly described), but it is not the only one. There is also a bull terrier called Rex in the short story "Snapshot of a Dog" (published originally in the print edition of the March 9, 1935, issue of the *New Yorker*. Later, that same year, the story is collected in the same anthology as Feely's, *The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze*). In that story: "Rex is the noble, stoical side of that same nature. He fetches. (He fights, too, but the fighting is somehow more ritual than rage.)" (Gopnick, 2012, p. 1). In Thurber's fiction, dogs are generally endowed with unique personalities, just like human characters. And not just dogs, all animals. His literature is filled with examples of animals being both cheered and scoffed at. There are whole collections dedicated especially to fables; two of them aptly named *Fables for our Time and Famous Poems Illustrated* (1940) and *Further Fables for our Time* (1956). But there is more; there are whole books dedicated to stories containing animals in some capacity (or collections whose main short stories feature animals), namely: *Thurber's Dogs*; *Men, Women and Dogs*; *The Owl in The Attic*; *The Seal in the Bedroom*; *The Beast in Me and Other Animals*; *The White Deer*, among others. Some of these animals behave in accordance with what is expected of them, and some of them possess extraordinary

qualities (and also some peculiar behavioral habits as well). All of them are up to the standards set by Thurber when it comes to character development. Some more interesting examples can be found in the next section.

"Casuals of the keys"

The setting of this story is a remote island off the Florida coast, and the first interesting character the reader is introduced to is: "you may have met--although I greatly doubt it--Captain Darke. Darrell Darke. His haunted key is, for this reason and that, the most inaccessible of them all" (Thurber, 1935, p. 28). The reader is not only introduced to one of the main characters, but also learns a little more about the story's setting. The adjective 'haunted', associated with the sound of the last name Darke, coupled with the recurrent idea of inaccessibility exposed in the first paragraphs of the story, tend to lead to a combination that, in terms of atmosphere building, should rank low regarding receptiveness and approachability. This serves well in narrative terms to enhance the aura of mystery and the abstruse auspice. In turn, it should rank high in respect to its power of drawing attention and of enticing curiosity, which is nothing if not a bonus in literary currency.

The narrator continues the description of Captain Darke, depicting him as: "tall, dark, melancholy, his white shirt open at the throat, he reminded me instantly of that other solitary wanderer among forgotten islands, the doomed Lord Jim" (p. 28). The mention of forgotten, God forsaken places may just be complementary, but the mention of doom works as the proverbial cherry on the fated cake. It serves the purpose of adding that much more to the atmosphere of impending tragedy[2] that hovers over Thurber's character's descriptions.

Those who know of Lord Jim's tragedy have the opportunity of carrying this memory along during the reading of Thurber's story. All those adventures and the hazards that Lord Jim's exploits have led him to experience (and that the reader followed through with him) are bound to be committed to memory. As a result, more clandestinity and jeopardy are added to Thurber's story (*i.e.* to its reading experience). In fact,

[2] The noun 'tragedy' and the adjective 'tragic' have often been used in association with Conrad's character in critical literature, *e.g.*, in Najder's 1968 article *Lord Jim: A Romantic Tragedy of Honor*; in Epstein's 1973 *'Lord Jim' as a Tragic Action*; and in Ambrosini's 2013 *Tragic Adventures: Conrad's and Marlow's Conflicting Narratives in 'Lord Jim'*; to name a few.

Conrad's characters may be closer to Thurber's characters than one can initially surmise. Najder, while appraising Conrad's novel as a "romantic tragedy of honor" imparts that "the reader knows, for instance […] of Jim's daydreams of his own courage and efficiency in case of emergency and that it was these daydreams which prevented him from displaying the dream of courage and readiness for action when the opportunity to do so actually arose" (1968, p. 1). Daydreaming is a practice frequently found and thus traditionally associated with some of Thurber's characters; and rightly so. It is not an accident that Thurber's arguably most famous short story, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" revolves around a series of spectacular daydreaming incidents.

In cognitive terms, mentioning Lord Jim is a clever writerly device used by Thurber to delve into the reader's prior schemata, with the objective of enhancing the reading experience of his own story. By so doing, Thurber demonstrate an understanding of how different narrative circumstances "demand different ethical judgements and excite different expectations and desires" (Epstein, 1973, p. 229).

Back in the story, Darke asks the unnamed protagonist (who is also the narrator) about his profession:

> 'A newspaperman, eh?' said Darke, with interest, as I filled up the glasses for the third time. 'You must meet a lot of interesting people.' I really felt that I had met a lot of interesting people and, under slight coaxing, began to tell about them: Gene Tunney[3], Eddie Rickenbacker[4], the Grand Duchess Marie[5], William Gibbs McAdoo[6]. Darke listened to my stories with quick attention, thirsty as he was for news of the colorful civilization which, he told me, he had put behind him twenty years before (Thurber, 1935, p. 28).

The narrator, perhaps a little self-conscious for having monopolized a large portion of the conversation (albeit his listener did provide him with due unmitigated attention), politely suggests that Darke has certainly met some interesting people

[3] Gene Tunney was an American professional boxer. He competed from 1915 to 1928 and held the world heavyweight title from 1926 to 1928 (as well as the American light heavyweight title twice between 1922 and 1923).
[4] Eddie Rickenbacker was an American fighter pilot in World War I. He was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor in 1930. He had 26 aerial victories to his name and was, arguably, the most successful and most decorated United States flying ace of the Great War. He was also a racing driver, an automotive designer, and a long-time head of Eastern Air Lines.
[5] The Grand Duchess Marie, of Russia, was the third daughter of Tsar Nicholas II and Tsarina Alexandra Feodorovna. She was murdered soon after the Russian Revolution of 1917. The event resulted in her canonization as a passion bearer by the Russian Orthodox Church.
[6] William Gibbs McAdoo Jr. was an American lawyer and statesman. He was a leader of the Progressive movement and played a major role in the administration of his father-in-law President Woodrow Wilson. He was a member of the Democratic Party and represented California in the United States Senate.

himself. To this Darke replies negatively: "'No,' he said. 'All of a stripe, until you came along'" (p. 28) and immediately starts to tell of this "little fellow name of Mark Menafee who turned up one day some three years ago in an outboard motor. He was only a trainer of fugitives from justice" (p. 28). With the use of 'only' Darke reveals, to the attentive reader, that he has much more in store than he initially lets out. The word 'only' could very well have been accompanied by a sideway smirk and a quick glance (in search of cognizance and reciprocation), thus sealing the satirical interaction (not with caustic or sarcastic intent, but rather with playful, spoofing motivation). Darke goes on to explain what the job of a trainer of fugitives constitutes of: "'He coached fugitives from justice,' said Darke. 'Seems Menafee could spot one instantly'" (p. 28). Darke exemplifies with the case of one Burt Fredericks, who is a bank defaulter from Connecticut who has been spotted by Menafee on a boat (he recognizes his face from the newspapers). Menafee approaches Burt, who then introduces himself by the alias of Charles Brandon. Menafee wins his confidence and offers to teach Burt how not to be caught off guard; for a fee, of course. Menafee's plan is to follow Burt from city to city, contriving to come upon him unexpectedly in several public places full of people and to yell 'Burt!' in front of them, or he would say 'It's old Fredericks!' as if he is meeting an old friend after years. Fredericks's part of the bargain would be to show no reaction whatsoever, unless he is addressed directly as Charlie or Brandon. Menafee maintains that, with this strategy, Burt would never be caught: "far as I know he was never caught. Menafee made enough to keep going, coaching fugitives, but it was a dullish kind of job. Darke fell silent. I sat watching him" (p. 29). Once again the adjective 'dullish' being used in antiphrastic[7] fashion. Not cynically, but humorously. The narrator responds correspondingly in tone by asking: "'Did you ever meet any other uninteresting people?'" (p. 29).

Darke introduces the second character on his inventory of singularly odd, unassumingly extraordinary people:

> 'There was Harrison Cammery,' said Darke, after a moment. 'He put in here one night in a storm, dressed in full evening clothes. Came from New York – I don't know how. There never was a sign of a boat or anything to show how he got here. He was always that way while he was here, dully incomprehensible. He had the most uninteresting of manias, which is monomania. He was a goldfish-holder' (p. 30).

[7] Antiphrasis is the rhetorical device of saying the opposite of what is actually meant – It is usually used in a way that makes the true intention obvious.

The puzzled narrator feels obliged to ask what it means to be a goldfish-holder. Darke explains that Cammery had been a professional billiard player who had developed steady nerveless hands. He had trained so much that he could balance five BB shots on the back of each of his fingers for as long as he wanted. Then, finally, the goldfish-holding business is clarified:

> One night, at a party where the host had a bowl of goldfish, the guests got to trying to catch them with one grab of their hand. Nobody could do it until Cammery tried. He caught up one of the fish and held it lightly in his closed hand. […] He got to snatching up goldfish and holding them, wherever he went. At length he had to have a bowl of them beside the table when he played his billiard matches, and would hold one between innings the way tennis-players take a mouthful of water (p. 31).

Cammery tells Darke that the effect of the goldfish-holding vocation eventually destroys his muscular precision (fine motor activity), and that that has been the reason that led him to the Florida Keys in the first place. Darkes continues: "'so he took to the islands. One day he was gone from here – I don't know how. I was glad enough. A singularly one-track and boring fellow'" (p. 31). In telling the story and in mentioning how his guest came and went inexplicably, Darke enshrouds Cammery with a mystery and an inscrutability that lasts throughout the whole narration of his stay.

Stimulated by the narrator's wishes and a few glasses of liquor Darke tells of the third bizarre character of the story:

> 'early in 1913 an old fellow with a white beard--must have been seventy-five or eighty--walked into this hut one day. He was dripping wet. Said he swam over from the mainland and he probably did. It's fifty miles. […] He was as dull about everything as about that. Used to recite short stories word for word—said he wrote them himself. He was a writer like you, but he didn't seem to have met any interesting people. Talked only about himself, where he'd come from, what he'd done. I didn't pay any attention to him. I was glad when, one night, he disappeared. His name was..." Darke put his head back and stared at the roof of his hut, striving to remember. "Oh, yes," he said. "His name was Bierce. Ambrose Bierce' (p. 31).

Darke's offhand account of Ambrose Bierce demonstrates he knows what he is doing. And he, as a matter of fact, knows the treasure he holds with his memoirs. Thurber frequently inserts literary allusions in his writings. In this particular story he has already made direct reference to Conrad's Lord Jim. And now Bierce. It is in this passage that the reader learns the narrator has actually introduced himself to Darke as a writer (though Darke refers back to him as a newspaperman, leading the reader to

believe the narrator had *a priori* designated himself as a journalist or a reporter). This hints strongly to the narrator's identity being a fictional simile of Thurber himself; something which is not uncommon in Thurber's fiction[8] either, nor in literature in general. As a matter of fact, it is quite common for a writer to insert in his fictional world a *persona*, a character that represents the narrative voice of the author (not uncommonly through a first-person narrator – which is, by the way, the case in both "The Departure of Emma Inch" and in "Casuals of the Keys").

Thurber than uses the year 1913 as segway to introduce his fourth, and last, surprising character: "'You say that was in 1913, early in 1913?' I asked, excitedly. 'Yes, I'm sure of it,' said Darke, 'because it was the same year C-18769 showed up here'" (p. 31). It turns out that C-18769 is a carrier pigeon. Darke knows the pigeon's denomination because he had seen its registration number on a silver band fastened to its leg. The listener already knows of this particular pigeon's existence for he had read earlier on a newspaper about it:

> One day I saw a notice in one of the papers about this bird. Some concern or other, for a publicity stunt, had arranged to have this bird carry a thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills from the concern's offices to the place where the bird homed, some five hundred miles away. The bird never got there (p. 30-31).

The newspaper prints different kinds of theories as to why the bird never arrived at its destination. It getting lost seems the most plausible one: "'Lost, hell,' said Darke. 'After I read the stories I caught it up one day, suddenly, and examined the packet strapped to it. It only had four hundred and sixty-five dollars left'" (p. 32). Although there can be many guesses and many interpretations as to what really happened to the money, the funniest one seems to point to the version where the pigeon itself had been deliberately spending the money. Under this impression, the narrator responds with acknowledgement:

> I felt a little weak. Finally, in a small voice, I asked: 'Did you turn it over to the authorities?' 'Certainly not,' said Darrell Darke. 'A man or a bird's life is his own to lead, down here. I simply figured this pigeon for a fool, and let him go. What could he do, after the money was gone? Nothing.' […] 'That's the kind of beings you meet with down here,' he said. 'Stupid, dullish, lacking in common sense, fiddling along aimlessly. […] It gets monotonous (p. 32).

[8] Thurber even has a fictional *persona* that answers by the name of Jacob Thurman. Incidentally he was one of the protagonists of "The Departure of Emma Inch".

To Darke, Menafee, Cammery, Bierce, C-18769 are all the same, monotonous, he puts it once again antiphrastically. Finally, in a respectively polite and comical maneuver, Darke urges the narrator to tell him more about the Grand Duchess Marie: "'She must be a most interesting person'" (p. 32) he says, sealing his role as the enigmatic, eloquent and satirical character that he is.

Views on literary character development

That characters are considered central to works of fiction is no mystery. Since there are as many opinions on the subject as there are writers, any generalization becomes moot. Maslej *et al*. (2017) have conducted an exploratory study to examine whether the ability to sketch engaging fictional characters is influenced by a writer's attributes. They have found that writers who also write fiction and poetry and who read more poetry, and writers who score high on Openness to Experience, sketch characters that are more interesting and complex. Writers with higher levels of perspective-taking produce characters that are more complex, however, those for whom social information is cognitively more accessible tend to create characters who are less likable. Their findings suggest that there is a measurable influence of individual differences on the ability to develop compelling fictional characters during creative writing.

Tackling from a somewhat different perspective, Hepola believes that interesting characters are part of something much bigger:

> a large part of the reason why we value works like Shakespeare's and Dostoevsky's is because these texts provide us with more than simply interesting characters and entertaining plotlines; these texts are believed to be sources of profound insights into the human condition (2014, p. 79).

This belief is constitutive of the view that claim books are considered great, in part, due to their cognitive value. This view is known by philosophers as "literary cognitivism" or simply "cognitivism." Philosophers who adhere to that view and write works defending it are Morris Weitz, Martha Nussbaum, and Eileen John, to name a few.

Cognitivism has also attracted much criticism. Among the anti-cognitivist arguments is that literature is not a special source of knowledge, since the knowledge found in fiction can also be acquired from non-literary sources. Another criticism highlights the difficulty in finding explicit philosophical arguments in complex literary

texts. Sometimes a reader must work too hard to extract knowledge from a much-too-complex fictional source (and similar knowledge could be more easily extracted from the direct reading of, say, a treatise by Kant or by Mill). Finally, the strongest argument against literary cognitivism may as well be the simplest one; it is that readers cannot really learn something about the real world from a text that is clearly fiction, and therefore unreal. In that sense:

> fictional characters do not exist, the things that fictional characters say and do, do not actually happen, and all the things that are gleaned from this — i.e., the profound truths about the human condition we supposedly learn from literature — are based on nothing real (Hepola, 2014, p. 80).

Hepola (2014) brings from philosophy yet another perspective; one called "fictional realism". It seems that this perspective is born as a reaction to anti-cognitivist objections (while in reality it was not). Fictional realism claims that fictional items, such as places and characters (based on their claim to verisimilitude) arguably do exist. Thus, according to a fictional realist standpoint, fictional characters are:

> full-fledged, metaphysically respectable entities […] According to fictional realism, fictional characters are *bona fide* objects, as much a part of the real world as numbers, atoms, trees, and people. If fictional characters are part of the real world, then surely we can learn things about the real world from them. So initially it appears that fictional realism could provide solid support for cognitivism (Hepola, 2014, p. 80).

This is not, however, a completely consensual position. Among fictional realists there is considerable controversy about exactly what sort of object fictional characters are. The debate is far from over. Biographical (and autobiographical) studies have historically gone through similar predicaments. After all, biographers conceivably deal with (literary) characters.

It is universally accepted that biographies are written about the living and the dead, and universal agreement in the field, as is to be expected, pretty much ends there. Even a very conventional view of biography that states that it has but one goal, *i.e.* "to get to know and understand both the biography's subject and the society in which he or she lived" (Hamilton, 2018, p. 2) has, nowadays, its detractors.

Biography as a genre has surprisingly been receiving a lot of attention academically over the past few decades. And still, every biographer (regardless of being a journalist or a historian) has, unsurprisingly, his own vision of what a biography is.

Biographies and biographers, currently, face new battles. Present day biographers are struggling with political issues related to fake news (that seem to have turned the concept of verifiable truth upside down) and with extreme forms of poststructuralism and deconstruction, as well as with the relation between what is considered science and what is social construction. It seems that now biographers must work harder in order to find authentic sources of information (Farrell, 2018).

From the other side of the argument there is the claim that "biographers may resist the extreme interpretations — and extreme criticism — of postmodern theory […] but it is foolish to say that social constructs and other forces don't guide the lives and choices of individuals" (Farrell, 2018, p. 8). For that matter, biography studies may as well be suspended between the poles of objective knowledge and subjective perception, a position that, according to Klein, has positive and negative implications; to him, "reflective biographies can help bridge these poles and create reciprocal understanding, as well to productively close the gap between theory and living practice or everyday perceptions" (Autor, 2016, p. 1). If this works it seems a rational step in the direction of the always-fleeting political-ideological balance.

From all of that, one can establish that characters are only interesting if readers deem them so. This means there is no formula for writing compelling characters. There are, naturally, guidelines that authors adhere to (after all there is a gargantuan market in teaching creative writing). One of the amusing, if not surprising facts (chiefly due to how counterintuitive it is) in this regard is that characters do not have to be likable to be enjoyed.

Final considerations

In "The Departure of Emma Inch" it is known that one character is based on a real-life person, which is Mr. Thurman, Thurber's fictional *alter ego*. The reader experiences most of the story through his eyes (and laughs at his reactions – sometimes approvingly, sometimes not). The wife may as well be based on his real-life spouse. As a character, she is not well developed enough for the reader to corroborate or disprove

this hypothesis. Emma and Feely (for fictional animals can also be based on real-life animals – or persons, in the case of fables), on the other hand, are brain teasers.

It is not uncommon for writers to listen to people's dialogues in real life (good writers are usually good listeners – or should be). After an entrancing makeover, these lines they hear may appear on the pages of their fiction. If successful, with the same corporality and twang they have in real life (as often occurs in Thurber's case). And perhaps that can also be a form of biography (at least if the etymology of the word is considered *stricto sensu*, for it is, after all, the writing of life as it happens routinely through that which is one of the most distinctive qualities of the human being, through language).

Feely is a nice example (although the reader is presented with no evidence of its inspiration from the real world). In Thurber's story, its relationship with its owner is much more complex than can be surmised at first glance. There seems to be a collaboration between Emma and Feely that extends far beyond a simple partnership. Interestingly, Feely is not a talking dog *per se*, like the ones from the fables To its owner, however, it might as well just be, for: "Feely's asthmatic noises were the only sounds in the room for a while. 'Doesn't that dog ever stop that?' I asked, irritably. 'Oh, he's just talking,' said Emma. 'He talks all the time, but I'll keep him in my room and he won't bother you none'" (Thurber, 1935, p. 19). When the four characters (Emma, Feely and the couple) are at the first cab, and Emma asks the driver to slow down: "Feely began to make a new sound – a kind of high, agonized yelp. 'He's singing,' said Emma" (p. 20). And finally, when Emma is convinced to board the first boat, the reader has, at that moment, sufficient evidence to corroborate the hypothesis (if it was raised) that Emma transfers her feelings and specially her apprehensions to her dog (though the narration does not give off direct evidence as to whether she really believes that or merely uses that as a coping strategy): "'I don't think I could get on a boat. […] She stood rooted to the pier, clasping Feely. She must have squeezed him too hard, for he screamed – he screamed like a woman. We all jumped. 'It's his ears,' said Emma. 'His ears hurt'" (p. 20). In conclusion, Feely is a rather unique dog because it (somewhat) talks and (convectively) feels like a person, and it is not in a fable (maybe he does not really talk, but he does make plenty of human-like noises – including snoring!).

In "Casuals of the keys" Thurber subverts the characteristic device of presenting a character nonchalantly right on the onset only to, in due time, overhaul the same

character as one of the most adventurous and entrancing figures in literature. Incidentally that is the device used by Conrad while introducing the unforgettable Lord Jim:

> 'He was an inch, perhaps two, under six feet…'. Considering that Jim's height has no bearing on his story, perhaps no other great novel begins so non-chalantly. This device is characteristic. At the very opening of the novel we encounter an example of the play of shadows with which the author will carry on to the end (Najder, 1968, p. 1).

Conversely, Thurber introduces, in the beginning of the story, a character who claims he has met some interesting people only to be overshadowed unexpectedly by the much more interesting people described by his strange host.

The *New Yorker*'s blurb for "Casuals of the Keys" mentions that Captain Darke "tells a yarn", referring to the idiom "to spin a yarn" meaning "to tell a tale" (generally a narrative of adventures, especially a tall tale). According to Brown (1987, p. 32): "the tall tale is, first, a play form, a game designed to entertain and amuse […] being told in barrooms, on steamboats and stagecoaches, beside campfires, and from the loafers' bench in front of the general store". She adds that tall tales are generally told by rural men "particularly when some greenhorn or tenderfoot[9] – an eastern visitor was present" (Brown, 1987, p. 32). That last description is quite accurate about how Captain Darke may have perceived the narrator, that is, as the typical "city slicker". Brown (1987, p. 32) is once again precise when she affirms that: "the tall tale narrator [is] a member of a subculture on the geographical and social fringes". Which quite accurately describes Captain Darke's setting, as well as his self-declared and self-imposed position – a recluse on the most inaccessible of all Florida islands. As a teller of tall tales Darke embodies the role of joker and storyteller all at once. His interaction with the Thurber fictional *persona* transforms what could otherwise be an ordinary conversation into a long and entertaining story-telling session (which is, in essence, the whole short story). Darke, much as Thurber, his creator, can be justly branded a virtuoso raconteur.

[9] Greenhorn or tenderfoot were expressions that originated in the American old West, usually as somewhat derogatory terms to refer to an Easterner who was, for all intents and purposes, unschooled in the ways of the West. They were sometimes called "strangers" and "pilgrims". The origin of the term tenderfoot meant to imply that an Easterner had feet that were more tender than the Longhorn cattle's. The term only later applied to people new to the West.

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