

The Princess and the Tin Box

Fable by James Thurber

Are **DIAMONDS** really a girl's best friend?

COMMON CORE

RL 4 Analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning.

RL 5 Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text create surprise.

L 5a Interpret figures of speech and analyze their role in the text.

For that matter, do clothes really make the man? We all know people who are superficial or shallow, concerned only with appearance rather than substance. In this takeoff on a fairy tale, James Thurber presents just such a person: a rich, spoiled princess.

PRESENT With a partner, create a "portrait" of a superficial person, using both words and images. Make your portrait as serious or as comically exaggerated as you like, but be sure to communicate how your subject thinks and acts. You can even outfit him or her in whatever clothes and accessories you think appropriate. After you've finished, pair up with another group and take turns presenting your portraits.



● TEXT ANALYSIS: PARODY

Humorist James Thurber is known for his sly, skillful way of making fun of society. “The Princess and the Tin Box” begins in a very familiar way:

Once upon a time, in a far country, there lived a king whose daughter was the prettiest princess in the world.

With that opening sentence, readers immediately recognize that they have been whisked into a fairy tale. This particular tale, however, is a **parody**—a literary work that imitates another piece of literature in order to poke fun at it. To analyze this imitation fairy tale, be on the lookout for the following stylistic techniques:

- **Word Choice:** Notice how Thurber imitates the language used in fairy tales, as in the opening lines above.
- **Exaggeration:** Look for characters or situations exaggerated by the author for comic effect.
- **Irony:** Identify ironic plot twists, or moments when Thurber structures events in a surprising way, allowing them to unfold very differently from the way you would expect.

As you read, look for evidence of these techniques. Think about the ways in which this parody resembles a traditional fairy tale and the ways in which it does not.

● READING STRATEGY: PREDICT

Fairy tales are usually pretty predictable. As you read this selection, jot down your impressions of the princess. Use these notes about the princess’s character to make **predictions** about what will happen next in the story. After the last events have unfolded, ask yourself whether this is the “happily ever after” you anticipated.



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

James Thurber

1894–1961

Early Years

One of the great humorists of American literature, James Thurber made a career out of poking fun at society. Despite a childhood eye injury that left him with lifelong vision problems, Thurber attended college and got early jobs as a clerk and then as a journalist. In 1927, the *New Yorker*, a literary magazine, published one of his stories. He would write for the magazine for the rest of his life.

The *New Yorker* Years

The *New Yorker* gave Thurber his fame, and he gave the magazine much of the sophisticated style it has today. Thurber often provided his own illustrations to accompany his writing. Although he did not consider himself an artist, his cartoons had a distinctive style and became as popular as his stories. Readers loved him for being so funny, but Thurber took humor seriously. “I write humor the way a surgeon operates,” he said, “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.”

Last Years

By the age of 57, Thurber’s childhood eye injury had degenerated to almost total blindness. When his vision began to fail completely, Thurber started dictating stories to his secretary. His memory was so sharp that he could easily compose a 2,000-word story in his mind, remember it overnight, and dictate it to his secretary the next day. His friend and fellow-writer E. B. White described him this way: “During his happiest years, Thurber did not write the way a surgeon operates, he wrote the way a child skips rope, the way a mouse waltzes.”

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THE *Princess* AND THE *Tin Box*

JAMES THURBER

Once upon a time, in a far country, there lived a king whose daughter was the prettiest princess in the world. Her eyes were like the cornflower, her hair was sweeter than the hyacinth, and her throat made the swan look dusty.

From the time she was a year old, the princess had been showered with presents. Her nursery looked like Cartier's window.¹ Her toys were all made of gold or platinum or diamonds or emeralds. She was not permitted to have wooden blocks or china dolls or rubber dogs or linen books, because such materials were considered cheap for the daughter of a king.

When she was seven, she was allowed to attend the wedding of her brother
10 and throw real pearls at the bride instead of rice. Only the nightingale, with his lyre of gold, was permitted to sing for the princess. The common blackbird, with his boxwood flute,² was kept out of the palace grounds. She walked in silver-and-samite slippers to a sapphire-and-topaz bathroom and slept in an ivory bed inlaid with rubies. **A**

On the day the princess was eighteen, the king sent a royal ambassador to the courts of five neighboring kingdoms to announce that he would give his daughter's hand in marriage to the prince who brought her the gift she liked the most.

The first prince to arrive at the palace rode a swift white stallion and laid
20 at the feet of the princess an enormous apple made of solid gold which he had taken from a dragon who had guarded it for a thousand years. It was placed on a long ebony table set up to hold the gifts of the princess's suitors. The second prince, who came on a gray charger,³ brought her a nightingale made

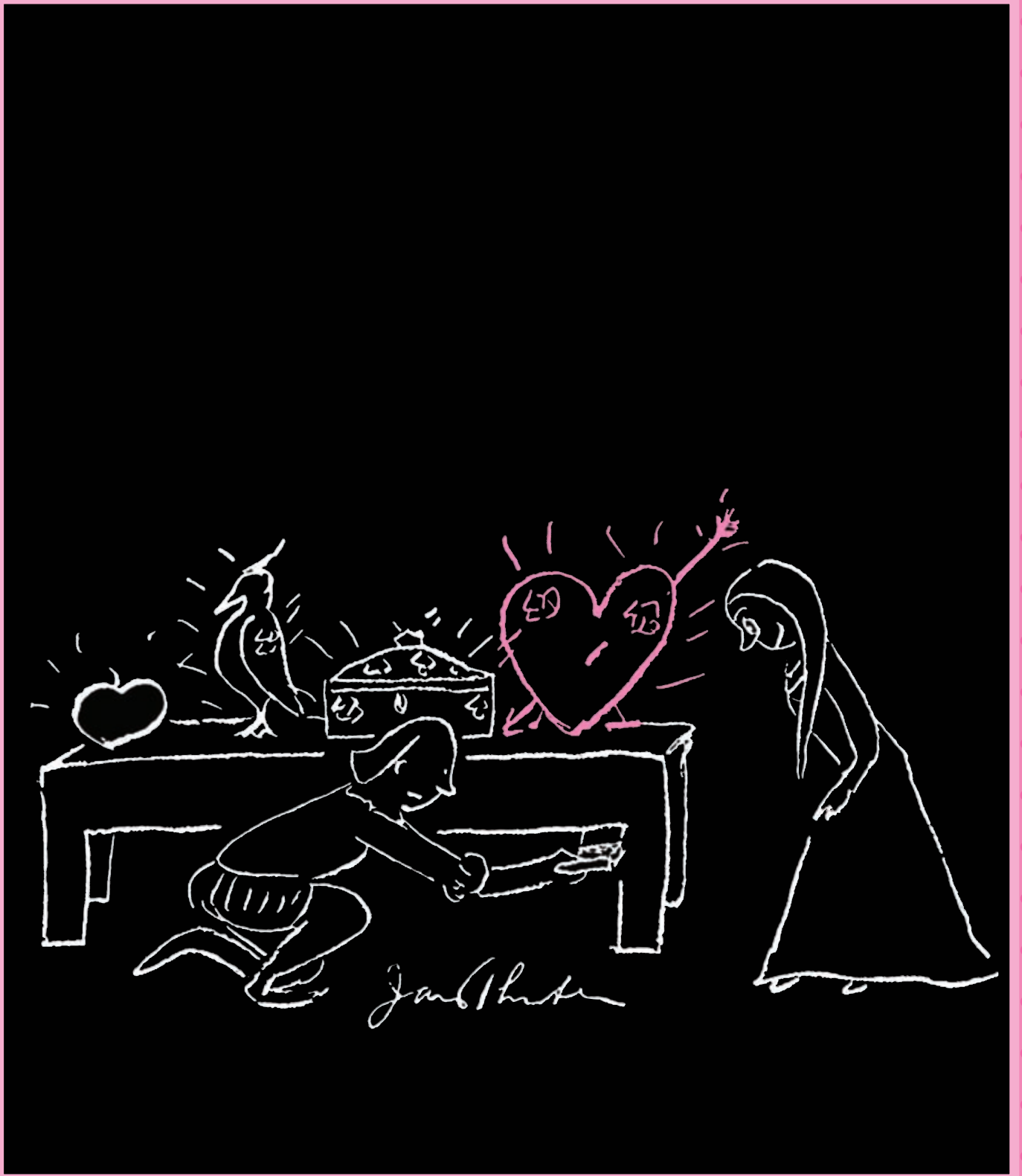
Analyze Visuals ▶

Thurber often sketched childlike line drawings like this one to accompany his stories. What basic ideas about love or courtship does he present in this sketch?

A PARODY

Reread lines 1–14 and identify at least two examples of **exaggeration**. What is the effect of this stylistic technique? Explain your answer.

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1. **Cartier's** (kār-tyāz') **window**: the show window of a well-known jewelry store.
 2. **lyre** (līr) **of gold** . . . **boxwood flute**: The nightingale's voice is likened to a golden harp; the blackbird's voice is likened to a cheap wooden flute.
 3. **charger**: warhorse.



of a thousand diamonds, and it was placed beside the golden apple. The third prince, riding on a black horse, carried a great jewel box made of platinum and sapphires, and it was placed next to the diamond nightingale. The fourth prince, astride a fiery yellow horse, gave the princess a gigantic heart made of rubies and pierced by an emerald arrow. It was placed next to the platinum-and-sapphire jewel box.

30 Now the fifth prince was the strongest and handsomest of all the five suitors, but he was the son of a poor king whose realm had been overrun by mice and locusts and wizards and mining engineers so that there was nothing much of value left in it. He came plodding up to the palace of the princess on a plow horse and he brought her a small tin box filled with mica and feldspar and hornblende⁴ which he had picked up on the way. **B**


The other princes roared with disdainful laughter when they saw the tawdry⁵ gift the fifth prince had brought to the princess. But she examined it with great interest and squealed with delight, for all her life she had been glutted with precious stones and priceless metals, but she had never seen tin
40 before or mica or feldspar or hornblende. The tin box was placed next to the ruby heart pierced with an emerald arrow. **C**

“Now,” the king said to his daughter, “you must select the gift you like best and marry the prince that brought it.”

The princess smiled and walked up to the table and picked up the present she liked the most. It was the platinum-and-sapphire jewel box, the gift of the third prince.

“The way I figure it,” she said, “is this. It is a very large and expensive box, and when I am married, I will meet many admirers who will give me precious gems with which to fill it to the top. Therefore, it is the most valuable of all the
50 gifts my suitors have brought me and I like it the best.”

The princess married the third prince that very day in the midst of great merriment and high revelry.⁶ More than a hundred thousand pearls were thrown at her and she loved it.

Moral: All those who thought the princess was going to select the tin box filled with worthless stones instead of one of the other gifts will kindly stay after class and write one hundred times on the blackboard “I would rather have a hunk of aluminum silicate⁷ than a diamond necklace.”  **D**

B PARODY

Think about the typical plot, setting, and characters of a fairy tale. Find three places where Thurber mimics these conventions in this story.

C PREDICT

Consider your impression of the princess and her reactions to her suitors' gifts. Do you think she will choose to marry the poor but handsome prince or one of the rich, snobby ones? Give reasons for your prediction.

COMMON CORE L 5a

D PARODY

Sarcasm is a kind of particularly cutting verbal irony that, though sometimes humorous, can be used to insult or chastise. In this moral, Thurber playfully chastises readers who foresaw a different ending, but he does so to make a point. What point about human nature does the moral suggest? Explain.

4. **mica** (mī'kə) and **feldspar and hornblende** (hôn'blënd'): three common minerals.

5. **tawdry** (tô'drē): flashy but cheap.

6. **revelry** (rĕv'əl-rē): noisy celebrating.

7. **aluminum silicate** (sīl'Y-kāt'): a basically worthless chemical compound; refers to the mica, feldspar, and hornblende in the prince's box.

Comprehension

1. **Recall** What does the king do on his daughter's 18th birthday?
2. **Paraphrase** Restate the moral of the story in your own words.

Text Analysis

3. **Interpret Irony** Reread lines 54–58. How does the end of this story play against the reader's normal expectations of a fairy tale? Explain how the ending is ironic, citing evidence from the text.
4. **Analyze Parody** In a chart like the one shown, record examples of the **stylistic techniques** Thurber uses to parody a fairy tale. Use your completed chart to explain what human trait or quality Thurber is poking fun at in this story.

<i>Stylistic Technique</i>	<i>Examples from the Text</i>
<i>Imitation of standard fairy tale language</i>	
<i>Exaggeration</i>	
<i>Irony</i>	

5. **Evaluate Predictions** How accurately did you predict what would happen at the end of the story? Explain whether or not you think Thurber intended to take his readers by surprise, and why.
6. **Make Judgments** A **parody** is an imitation of a writer's style, a type of literature, or a specific work, and is usually designed to make fun of something. In your opinion, is humor an effective tool for social criticism? Can making a joke or commenting on something in a comic way ever help bring about change? Explain your answer.

READING-WRITING CONNECTION

WRITING PROMPT

Short Constructed Response: New Ending

What would have happened if the princess had made a different choice? How else could this story have ended? In **one or two paragraphs**, imagine an alternate ending to the story and create a new moral to go with it. Try to mimic Thurber's dry, comic style.

REVISING TIP

Does your response convey what the princess's new choice is and why she made it? Is your response humorous? If not, revise your ending. Be sure to include a moral in a style similar to Thurber's.

Are **DIAMONDS** really a girl's best friend?

What do you value more than material possessions?

COMMON CORE

RL 4 Analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning. **RL 5** Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text create surprise.