

The Dog That Bit People
From *My Life and Hard Times*
By James Thurber

Multiple Choice

1. Which of the following words most nearly defines the word *humor* as it is used in paragraph 4, sentence 2?
 - a) funniness
 - b) mood
 - c) amusement
 - d) situation
 - e) personality

2. Why did the mother apparently send out candy at Christmas?
 - a) for appeasement
 - b) for charity
 - c) to ingratiate
 - d) to advertise
 - e) for business purposes

3. Which of the following is apparently NOT true of the mother in the narrative?
 - a) She defends Muggs when he bites people even though the dog is clearly vicious.
 - b) She is superstitious and believes in astrology.
 - c) She knows Latin.
 - d) She does not like mice.
 - e) She has a neighbor named Mrs. Detweiler.

4. Which of the following does not make Muggs seem more human than animal?
 - a) Muggs is described as being “choleric” and irritable in the morning.
 - b) Muggs is described as being afraid of electrical storms.
 - c) The mother wanted a tombstone and an inscription for Muggs.
 - d) Muggs bit people.
 - e) Muggs was sorry, the mother said, after he bit people.

5. What was the advantage of being a member of the family owning Muggs?

- a) Muggs was more affectionate toward family members.
 - b) Muggs was a good guard dog.
 - c) A family member was not bitten as often.
 - d) The family gained positive recognition from their neighbors.
 - e) The family was more cheerful having a dog in the house.
6. Thurber attributes Muggs' fear of electrical storms to ____.
- a) dreams that Muggs had had.
 - b) the mailman
 - c) Muggs' fright when the mantelpiece fell.
 - d) all of the above
 - e) none of the above
7. Why would the mother not tie Muggs up to stop him from biting people?
- a) She thought it was inhumane.
 - b) Muggs was extremely embarrassed being tied up.
 - c) Muggs would not eat.
 - d) both a and b
 - e) both b and c
8. Why was Uncle Horatio angry when he discovered that the family fed Muggs on a table?
- a) The family could not afford to feed a dog human food.
 - b) Muggs did not have any table manners.
 - c) Uncle Horatio thought that it was inappropriate for a dog to be fed at the table and foolish to do it out of fear.
 - d) The dog did not wait for the others to sit at the table before he started eating.
 - e) Uncle Horatio did not like dogs.
9. What is the best word to describe the mother's behavior toward Muggs?
- a) strict
 - b) rational
 - c) indulgent
 - d) vindictive
 - e) choleric
10. Why was the mother pleased with the inscription on Muggs' "tomb"?

- a) She thought that the meaning of the phrase *Cave Canem* was appropriate for a dog who had bitten so many people.
- b) She was well versed in the ancient languages and enjoyed the Latin writers.
- c) She liked the dignity that the Latin inscription lent to the dog's "tomb."
- d) She was really glad that Muggs was dead.
- e) Her sons told her that the epitaph meant "Flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

Questions for Class Discussion

1. Thurber describes his family dog Muggs as if he were a person. In what ways was Muggs treated as a human being? How does Thurber emphasize the ridiculousness of this situation? Do you think such a situation is common among pet owners?
2. What do you think is so funny about this essay? Choose some particular parts of the essay and be ready to discuss how Thurber achieves humor.

Writing Focus *Humor in Writing*

One of the most difficult things to do in writing is make a reader laugh. Some of the greatest writers in the English language— Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, Jonathan Swift and Chaucer—owe some of their success to this unique ability. These writers achieved humor in their writing through *satire*. Satire involves the use of hyperbole¹ to show the absolute irrationality, ridiculousness, or hypocrisy of human behavior. Mark Twain takes a jab at false religion in his satirical classic *Huckleberry Finn*. The caretakers of Huck, widow Douglas and Miss Watson, try very hard to "sivilize" the backwoods boy by making him learn table manners, mannerly dress and the Bible. However, by the end of the book the reader sees through the irrational and hypocritical ways of the civilized world, such as the institution of slavery, that it is the "civilized world," not Huck, that needs reform. The most famous scene in satiric literature is found in Dickens' *Oliver Twist* in which the starving orphan boy asks for more thin

¹ **hyperbole** Hyperbole is the use of exaggeration. When a mother tells her son, "I told you a million times to clean your room," she is using hyperbole. Hyperbole, however, is not an attempt to distort the truth; it is a figure of speech in which the reader is aware of the exaggeration.

gruel and the cook cringes back in absolute astonishment. The farcical exaggeration of the cook's reaction serves to point out the insensibility of the powers-that-be regarding the plight of the poor and the cruelty of the Poor Laws in England.

James Thurber's satire "The Dog That Bit People" is less vicious perhaps, but no less funny. In it he shows the irrationality of people and their pets. Unlike Twain and Dickens, who wrote about more serious human offenses, Thurber "created"² characters whose foibles are more ridiculous than noxious. This allows the reader more room to laugh with impunity. Reread Thurber's narrative and consider its humorous and satirical effect.

Writing Topic

Write a personal narrative about a pet that you have had or that someone else has had. Try to create humor in your writing through hyperbolic language, or satire. Although Thurber used fictional elements to ornament his narrative, be as faithful to the details of the true events as possible.

² Thurber's autobiography is a curious mixture of fact and fiction; some of the people he talks about in his essays are fictional.