

The *Unicorn in the Garden

*Once upon a sunny morning a man who sat in a *breakfast nook looked up from his scrambled eggs to see a white unicorn with a gold horn quietly *cropping the roses in the garden. The man went up to the bedroom where his wife was still asleep and woke her. "There's a unicorn in the garden," he said. "Eating roses." She opened one unfriendly eye and looked at him. "The unicorn is a *mythical beast," she said, and turned her back on him. The man walked slowly downstairs and out into the garden. The unicorn was still there; he was now *browsing among the tulips. "Here, unicorn," said the man, and he pulled up a lily and gave it to him. The unicorn ate it *gravely. With a *high heart, because there was a unicorn in his garden, the man went upstairs and *roused his wife again. "The unicorn," he said, "ate a lily." His wife sat up in bed and looked at him, coldly. "You are a *booby," she said, "and I am going to have you put in the *booby-hatch." The man, who had never liked the words "booby" and "booby-hatch," and who liked them even less on a shining morning when there was a unicorn in the garden, thought for a moment. "We'll see about that," he said. He walked over to the door. "He has a golden horn in the middle of his forehead," he told her. Then he went back to the garden to watch the unicorn; but the unicorn had gone away. The man sat down among the roses and went to sleep.

As soon as the husband had gone out of the house, the wife got up and dressed as fast as she could. She was very excited and there was a *gloat in her eye. She telephoned the police and she telephoned a psychiatrist; she told them to hurry to her house and bring a *strait-jacket. When the police and the psychiatrist arrived they sat down in chairs and looked at her, with great interest. "My husband," she said, "saw a unicorn this morning." The police looked at the psychiatrist and the psychiatrist looked at the police. "He told me it ate a lily," she said. The psychiatrist looked at the police and the police looked at the psychiatrist. "He told me it had a golden horn in the middle of its forehead," she said. At a solemn signal from the psychiatrist, the police leaped from their chairs and seized the wife.

They had a hard time *subduing her, for she put up a terrific struggle, but they finally subdued her. Just as they got her into the strait-jacket, the husband came back into the house.

"Did you tell your wife you saw a unicorn?" asked the police. "Of course not," said the husband. "The unicorn is a mythical beast." "That's all I wanted to know," said the psychiatrist. "Take her away. I'm sorry, sir, but your wife is *as crazy as a jay bird." So they took her away, cursing and screaming, and shut her up in an institution. The husband lived happily ever after.

*MORAL: *Don't count your boobies until they are hatched.*

Glossary

- as crazy as a jay bird** insane (slang; now out-of-date)
- booby** someone who is insane; **booby-hatch** an insane asylum, a hospital for the mentally ill (slang; now out-of-date)
- breakfast nook** a corner of the kitchen with a small table and, often, high-backed benches; popular in American homes in the 1930's and 40's
- browsing** here, eating slowly, as animals do in a field
- cropping** eating; used to describe the way animals eat the top of plants
- Don't count your boobies** *The actual proverb is Don't count your chickens until they are hatched meaning "don't count on something before it happens."* Cf. **hatch** to break out of an egg and **hatch** to put someone in a booby-hatch.
- gloat** *Thurber invented this noun from the verb gloat "to look at with selfish delight" and the expression to have a gleam in one's eye.*
- gravely** seriously
- high heart** great happiness
- mythical** fictitious, imaginary; adjective form of **myth**
- Once upon a** *Children's fairy tales traditionally begin "Once upon a time . . ." They end with "They all lived happily ever after." This story is from Thurber's FABLES FOR OUR TIME.*

(A **fable** is a short story, often with animals in it, which illustrates a moral. The most famous are those of Aesop and of La Fontaine.)

roused woke up, awakened

strait-jacket a white jacket with very long arms, the ends of which are tied behind someone's back to keep him still; used to subdue insane people

subdue overcome, bring under control

unicorn an animal like a horse, with a horn in the middle of its forehead

Comprehension and Discussion Questions

Fact

1. What kind of day was it? Where was the man sitting? What was he eating?
2. What did he see in the garden? What was it doing?
3. What did the man do? What was his wife doing?
4. How did the wife react to her husband's announcement about the unicorn?
5. What was the unicorn doing when the man went into the garden?
6. What did the man do? How did the unicorn react?
7. How did the wife respond to the news that the unicorn had eaten a lily?
8. What did the man do when he found that the unicorn had left?

Inference & Interpretation*

1. What does the setting tell you about the man's style of life?
- Why did he want to tell his wife about the unicorn? What suggests that the husband was disappointed by his wife's reaction?
- Why did it make the man so happy to have a unicorn in his garden? Was the husband worried by his wife's threat?

9. What did the wife do as soon as her husband had left the house? Why was there "a gloat" in her eye?
10. Whom did she telephone? What did she tell them? Why did the police and the psychiatrist look at the woman "with great interest" when they arrived?
11. How did the police and the psychiatrist react to her news about the unicorn? Why did they have to subdue the wife?
12. When did the husband come back into the house? Why didn't the husband come as soon as he heard the struggle begin?
13. How did he answer the police's question? Why did the husband respond as he did to the police's question?
14. Why did the psychiatrist tell the police to take the wife away? What sort of institution was the wife taken to?
15. What did the husband do? Explain the moral.

* These questions are the most important for class discussion.

Exercises

A. *Indirect speech with SAY and TELL.* Rewrite these sentences from the story, following the example.

Ex. "There's a unicorn in the garden," he said.

a) HE SAID (THAT) THERE WAS A UNICORN IN THE GARDEN.

b) HE TOLD HER (THAT) THERE WAS A UNICORN IN THE GARDEN.

1. "The unicorn is a mythical beast," she said.

a) _____

b) _____

2. "The unicorn," he said, "ate a lily."
a) _____
b) _____
3. "You are a booby," she said, "and I am going to have you put in the booby-hatch."
a) _____
b) _____
4. "We'll see about that," he said.
a) _____
b) _____
5. "My husband," she said, "saw a unicorn this morning."
a) _____
b) _____
6. "He told me it had a golden horn in the middle of its forehead," she said.
a) _____
b) _____

B. TRANSFORMING SENTENCES. Each of these sentences can be divided into several shorter sentences, either by eliminating a subordinating word or by adding a few words to a phrase. Rewrite the sentences, underlining words that you add.

Ex. Once upon a sunny morning a man who sat in a breakfast nook looked up from his scrambled eggs to see a white unicorn with a gold horn quietly cropping roses in the garden.

- a) IT WAS A SUNNY MORNING.
- b) A MAN WAS SITTING IN A BREAKFAST NOOK.
- c) HE WAS EATING SCRAMBLED EGGS.
- d) HE LOOKED UP AND SAW A WHITE UNICORN.
- e) THE UNICORN HAD A GOLD HORN.
- f) THE UNICORN WAS QUIETLY CROPPING ROSES IN THE GARDEN.

1. The man went up to the bedroom where his wife was still asleep and woke her.
a) _____
b) _____
c) _____

2. The man, who had never liked the words "booby" and "booby-hatch," and who liked them even less on a shining morning when there was a unicorn in the garden, thought for a moment.
a) _____
b) _____
c) _____
d) _____
3. As soon as the husband had gone out of the house, the wife got up and dressed as fast as she could.
a) _____
b) _____
c) _____
4. They had a hard time subduing her, for she put up a terrific struggle, but they finally subdued her.
a) _____
b) _____
c) _____
5. So they took her away, cursing and screaming, and shut her up in an institution.
a) _____
b) _____
c) _____

Topics for Discussion or Writing

1. How do the husband and wife differ in temperament and character?
2. In "The Chaser," it is *ironic* that Alan's idealized love may very likely turn to hate. What is the *irony* in this story?
3. "Don't put all your eggs in one basket," is an American proverb similar to the moral of this story. Is there a proverb in your culture which has the same moral?
4. In what ways is Thurber's fable similar to others that you know? In what ways is it different?