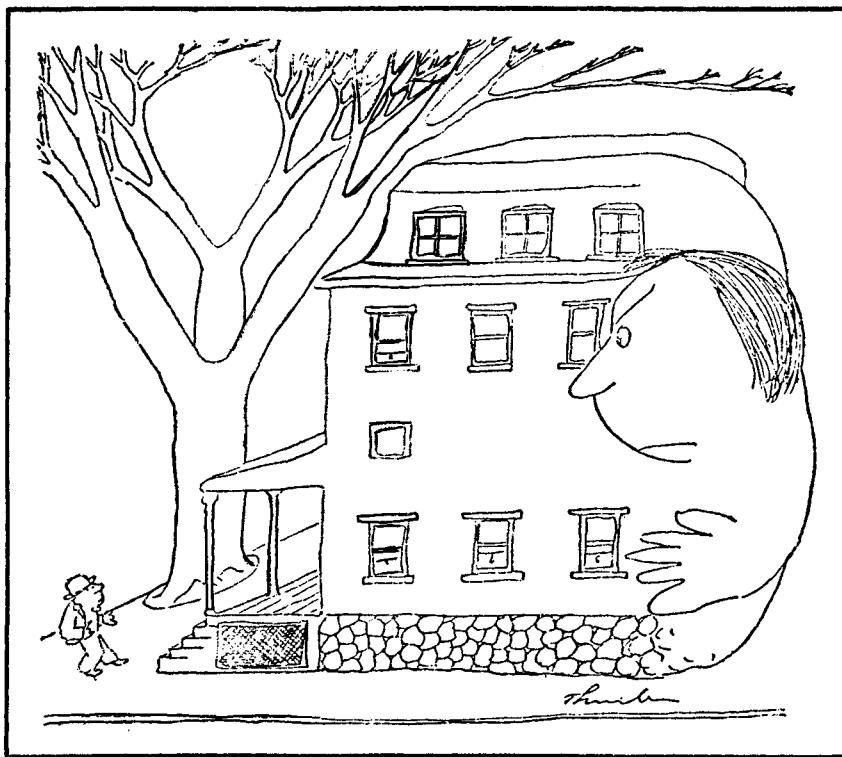


Who is the Victim and Who the Victimizer?

An 'Anti-Woman' Drawing Examined

Johanna H. Stuckey

*Analyse d'un point de vue féministe d'un dessin
de James Thurber représentant la femme victime.*



'House and Woman' from the Thurber Carnival, *Vintage Thurber*, Hamish Hamilton Ltd., copyright 1963.

When we look at the Thurber drawing 'Home',* we get an immediate and overwhelming impression of its being anti-woman. The woman is vicious and threatening and the man is tiny, scared and victimized. And, of course, we are right. That is the surface statement Thurber is making. But when we look more carefully at the drawing, we discover that he has, maybe even unconsciously, made in his seemingly simple composition an

even more devastating and horrible comment about one kind of relationship between the sexes than we had realized at first.

It is, no doubt, true that the minute, frightened man is mesmerized and hesitating at the jaw-like porch of the house, but if he decides to, he *can* run. And possibly Thurber thinks he ought to. The woman, on the other hand, cannot. She is *fixed*; she has no legs, indeed no body separate from the house. The only part of her

body visible, aside from her head, is one of her hands. Hands not only threaten and tear (as this one seems to be about to); they make dinners, clean houses, do *manual* labour. The woman in this drawing who, significantly, lurks at the back of the house where the kitchen would likely be located, probably works with her hands. As for her head, it is large, ugly, menacing. It is not at all enticing. It obviously contains no thoughts other than resentment and revenge. And all this hostility

the woman is directing towards the poor cowering creature before the door.

Examining the drawing again, we notice that the woman's body is not just a house but a house with a base that looks like a snake. Her head and arm taper off into the snake-like base. Is she that ancient symbol of evil and deceit, the serpent of the Garden of Eden? Probably not, since she is obviously no temptress. Possibly, rather, her snake-like tail symbolizes her hostile, aggressive quality, since the snake is often a phallic symbol and *then* stands for 'maleness' interpreted as activity and aggression, both traditionally 'male' qualities.

To carry the Garden of Eden idea further, let us note that in 'Home' there is a tree as well. Is it the Tree of Life or the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil? It could be either, but in this situation it is more likely to be the Tree of Life, since the time is clearly 'after the Fall' and the tree is *apart* from the two humans. The tree is *outside* the house, sheltering it, but it has no leaves, not even any forbidden fruit. If it be the Tree of Life, it is either quiescent for the winter — or dead. In either case it is non-productive. Further, a house is often a womb symbol and a porch or door a vulva symbol. And like trees they usually symbolize fertility.

In the Thurber drawing, the man is on the verge of entering the house and he is clearly frightened by the prospect. His entry into the house

is, of course, symbolic of his entry into a relationship with all that the house represents, including a sexual relationship with the woman. A generally held psychological theory maintains that an element of 'violence' is always inherent in the sex act. This 'violence' is not usually physical, nor even psychological, in the ordinary sense of the word. Rather, it is a kind of dislocation, disruption, upsetting, of the psychological patterns of the persons involved. It is the same sort of 'violence' we encounter when faced with an alien culture, a different mortality, a strange social situation. To encounter something 'other' than ourselves forces us to re-assess our own position and attitudes. (Only in terms of sexuality are woman and man 'other' to each other; in *this* Feminist argument, that is the only difference between them.) So when man and woman encounter one another sexually, they should both be aware of a resultant need to re-assess, to redefine themselves in terms of the 'other'. So, according to this theory, the sex act should be a learning experience, mind — and body — expanding, fertile, life-giving, *moving*. But this is certainly not the case in Thurber's drawing. The situation he depicts is not moving, 'violent' in the sense we have discussed, but static. Here, then, there is only *stasis* and hostility and hatred — not *Eros* (life) but *Thanatos* (death). We feel that somehow these two people

have *caused* one another's fear, hatred and pain. Neither has learned (nor will learn) from the encounter.

And so the Tree of Life, which should be flourishing freely above them, has died; their relationship is sterile, death-dealing. For the man, the House-Woman constitutes a fearful trap. But the woman's situation is even more horrible. She is trapped by the house, so much so that she is inseparable from it. She lurks at the back but dominates it. Furthermore, she has taken on a snake-like form (indicative of her aggressivity, passive though it may be — and passive aggression is one of the most destructive forms of aggression!).

So Thurber's drawing presents us with a point we are likely to overlook. *The man can run; the woman cannot*. Hence her pain *must* be the greater, for it is heightened by her frustration at her inability to act to relieve it. Therefore, the greater will be her resentment and desire for revenge — and her consequent menace to the man. Thus, in the situation Thurber presents, it is the woman who is the more victimized. But her only recourse is to avenge herself through hostility toward the man, who then becomes *her* victim. So the victimized *can* become the victimizer. It is for this reason that the Thurber drawing seems immediately anti-woman. But the real point is — when woman is chained, man's freedom is also in doubt. ©

*James Thurber, 'House and Woman,' in *The Thurber Carnival* (London: Penguin, 1953), p. 275. According to Mrs. Thurber, James Thurber named the drawing 'Home' not 'House and Woman'.