The Man Who Was Thursday

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Date 14 July 1996
Illustrations for G.K. Chesterton’s 

The Man Who Was Thursday 

An Honors Program Senior Project by 

Kirsten Behee 
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In choosing an illustration project for my senior thesis, it was my desire to incorporate skills learned in both my English major and my Art minor. As I moved through the process of creating intelligent and well researched visual images to accompany G.K. Chesterton’s work, I found that I used both of these areas of expertise in abundance. This project truly has become a bridge spanning these two disciplines, as the steps I went through to complete these project clearly indicate.

My initial step of this project was choosing a work of fiction to illustrate. After considering several possibilities I chose The Man Who Was Thursday for a number of reasons: it’s a favorite book of mine, it was a manageable length for the amount of time I had to devote to the project (2 quarters), it has great visual language to draw on, and it has philosophical nuances that I thought would be an intriguing challenge to illustrate. The first part of my research involved reading the book a number of times, underlining passages that seemed significant. I then spent a great deal of time trying to capture the essential nature of each chapter into a one line description. As I was doing this, I kept note of themes which began to emerge, as well as symbols that kept appearing. After revising my “one liners” a couple of times, I began to do some biographical research on Chesterton (some of which proved to be invaluable). I also typed out all the quotes I had found to be significant in the novel. Looking at all these passages together gave me a greater sense for what I was focusing on in my analysis.

At this point I had a firm grasp on the book, and began to think visually in a general way. I dialogued with Ed Bereal, my advisor, about how the themes present could be translated into a visual language. After a great deal of discussion the question of media was considered. It was then decided that brush and ink would be a good media to convey the ideas themes present. The next move was to examine the work of other
artists to get a sense for how we could create a sense of ambiguity and surprise in the illustrations. Our discussion was primarily focused on the art of Klimpt. Armed with ideas from other artists, I began to experiment with the medium and grow accustomed to its properties. I then proceeded to make several different sets of rough drafts. I would bring these in to my advisor and he would give input verbally and with his paintbrush. He would give me ideas about how to approach the visual feeling I wanted, which was incredibly helpful.

Due to time constraints (not due to a sense that I had all aspects of the illustrations exactly as I wished) I went ahead with the final drafts. These were done with India ink, white paint, and graphite, on 200 lb. watercolor paper. The final drafts were color copied in order to make the different media read as one graphic. These copies were mounted and put on display for my defense.
To Edmund Clerihew Bentley

A cloud was on the mind of men, and wailing went the weather,
Yea, a sick cloud upon the soul when we were boys together,
Science announced nonentity and art admired decay;
The world was old and ended: but you and I were gay;
Round us in antic order their crippled vices came—
Lust that had lost its laughter, fear that had lost its shame.
Like the white lock of Whistler, that lit our aimless gloom,
Men showed their own whiter feather as proudly as a plume.
Life was a fly that faded, and death a drone that stung;
The world was very old indeed when you and I were young.
They twisted even decent sin to shapes not to be named:
Men were ashamed of honour; but we were no ashamed.
Weak if we were and foolish, not thus we failed, not thus;
When that black Ball blocked the heavens he had no hymns from us.
Children we were—our forts of sand were even as weak as we,
High as they went we piled them up to break that bitter sea.
Fools as we were in motley, all jangling and absurd,
When all church bells were silent out cap and bells were heard.

Not all unhelped we held the fort, our tiny flags unfurled;
Some giants laboured in that cloud to lift it from the world.
I find again the book we found, I feel the hour that flings
Far out of fish-shaped Paumanok some cry of cleaner things;
And the Green Carnation withered, as in forest fires that pass,
Roared in the wind of all the world ten million leaves of grass;
Or sane and sweet and sudden as a bird sings in the rain—
Truth out of Tusitala spoke and pleasure out of pain.
Yea, cool and clear and sudden as a bird sings in the grey,
Dunedin to Samoa spoke, and darkness unto day.
But we were young; we lived to see God break their bitter charms.
God and the good Republic come riding back in arms:
We have seen the City of Mansoul, even as it rocked, relieved—
Blessed are they who did not see, but being blind, believed.

This is a tale of those old fears, even of those emptied hells,
And none but you shall understand the ture thing that it tells—
Of what colossal gods of shame could cow men and yet crash,
Of what huge devils hid the stars, yet fell at a pistol flash.
The doubts that were so plain to chase, so dreadful to withstand—
Oh, who shall understand but you; yea, who shall understand?
The doubts that drove us through the night as we two talked amain,
And day had broken on the streets e'er it broke upon the brain.
Between us, by the peace of God, such truth can now be told;
Yea, there is strength in striking roon, and good in growing old.
We have found common things at last, and marriage and a creed,
And I may safely write it now, and you may safely read.

G. K. C.
The suburb of Saffron Park lay on the sunset side of London, as red and ragged as a cloud of sunset. It was built of a bright brick throughout; its sky-line was fantastic, and even its ground plan was wild. It had been the outburst of speculative builder, faintly tinged with art, who called its architecture sometimes Elizabethan and sometimes Queen Anne, apparently under the impression that the two sovereigns were identical. It was described with some justice as an artistic colony, thought it never in any definable way produced any art. But although its pretensions to be an intellectual centre were a little vague, its pretensions to be a pleasant place were quite indisputable. The stranger who looked for the first time at the quaint red houses could only think how very oddly shaped the people must be who could fit in to them. Now when he met the people he was disappointed in this respect. The place was not only pleasant, but perfect, if once he could regard it not as a deception but rather as a dream. Even if the people were the "artists," the whole was nevertheless artistic... Thus, and thus only, the whole place had properly to be regard; it had to be considered not so much as a workshop for artist, but as a frail but finished work of art. A man who stepped into its social atmosphere felt as if he had stepped into a written comedy.

More especially this attractive unreality fell upon it about nightfall, when the extravagant roofs were dark against the afterglow and the whole insane village seemed as separate as a drifting cloud. This again was more strongly true of the many nights of local festivity, when the little gardens were often illuminated, and the big Chinese lanterns glowed in the dwarfish trees like some fierce and monstrous fruit.
Syme, though he understood nothing, listened instinctively for something serious. Gregory began in a smooth voice and with a rather bewildering smile.

“Mr. Syme,” he said, “this evening you succeeded in doing something rather remarkable. You did something to me that no man born of woman has ever succeeded in doing before.”

“Indeed!”

“Now I remember,” resumed Gregory reflectively, “one other person succeeded in doing it. The captain of a penny steamer (if I remember correctly) at Southend. You have irritated me.”

“I am very sorry,” replied Syme with gravity.

“I am afraid my fury and your insult are too shocking to be wiped out even with an apology,” said Gregory very calmly. “No duel could wipe it out. If I struck you dead I could not wipe it out. There is only one way by which that insult can be erased, and that way I choose. I am going, at the possible sacrifice of my life and honour, to prove to you that you were wrong in what you said.”

“In what I said?”

“You said I was not serious about being an anarchist.”

Syme, who had sat down once more with his usual insolent languor, got to his feet with an unusual air of hesitation.

“Why is it,” he asked vaguely, “that I think you are quite a decent fellow? Why do I positively like you, Gregory?” He paused a moment, and then added with a sort of fresh curiosity, “Is it because you are such an ass?”
Somewhat dazed and considerably excited, Syme allowed himself to be led to a side-door in the long row of buildings of Scotland Yard. Almost before he knew what he was doing, he had been passed through the hands of about four intermediate officials, and was suddenly shown into a room, the abrupt blackness of which startled him like a blaze of light. It was not the ordinary darkness, in which forms can be faintly traced; it was like going suddenly stone-blind.

"Are you the new recruit?" asked a heavy voice.

And in some strange way, though there was not the shadow of a shape in the gloom, Syme knew two things: first, that it came from a man of massive stature; and second, that the man had his back to him.

"Are you the new recruit?" said the invisible chief, who seemed to have heard all about it. "All right. You are engaged."

Syme, quite swept off his feet, made a feeble fight against this irrevocable phrase.

"I really have no experience," he began.

"No one has any experience," said the other, "of the Battle of Armageddon."

"But I am really unfit—"

"You are willing, that is enough," said the unknown.

"Well, really," said Syme, "I don’t know any profession of which mere willingness is the final test."

"I do," said the other—"martyrs. I am condemning you to death. Good-day."
As he walked across the inner room towards the balcony, the large face of Sunday grew larger and larger; and Syme was gripped with a fear that when he was quite close the face would be too big to be possible, and that he would scream aloud.

Syme had thought at first that they were all of common stature and costume, with the evident exception of the hairy Gogol. But as he looked at the others, he began to see in each of them exactly what he had seen in the man by the river, a demoniac detail somewhere. That lopsided laugh, which would suddenly disfigure the fine face of his original guide, was typical of all these types. Each man had something about him perceived perhaps at the tenth or twentieth glance, which was not normal, and which seemed hardly human.
Every movement of the old man's tottering figure and vague hands, every uncertain gesture and panic-stricken pause, seemed to put it beyond question that he was helpless, that he was in the last imbecility of the body. He moved by inches, he let himself down with little gasps of caution. And yet, unless the philosphical entities called time and space have no vestige even of a practical existence, it appeared quite unquestionable that he had run after the omnibus.

The man's colourless face and manner seemed to assert that the whole following had been an accident. Syme was galvanised with an energy that was something between bitterness and a burst of boyish derision. He made a wild gesture as if to know the old man's hat off, called out something like "Catch me if you can," and went racing away across the white, open Circus. Concealment was impossible now; and looking back over his shoulder, he could see the black figure of the old gentleman coming after him with long, swinging strides like a man winning a mile race. But the head upon that bounding body was still pale, grave, and professional, like the head of a lecturer upon the body of a harlequin.

Syme had for a flash the sensation that the cosmos had turned exactly upside down, that all trees were growing downwards and that all stars were under his feet. Then came slowly the opposite conviction. For the last twenty—four hours the cosmos had really been upside down, but now the capsized universe had come right side up again. This devil from whom he had been fleeing all day was only an elder brother of his own house, who on the other side of the table lay back and laughed at him... Taking his own blue police ticket from his own waistcoat pocket, he tossed it on to the table, then he flung his head back until his spike of yellow beard almost pointed at the ceiling, and shouted with a barbaric laughter.
Syme felt a strange and vivid value in all the earth around him, in the grass under his feet; he felt the love of life in all living things. He could almost fancy that he heard the grass growing; he could almost fancy that even as he stood fresh flowers were springing up and breaking into blossom in the meadow... and whenever his eyes strayed for a flash from the calm, staring, hypnotic eyes of the Marquis, they saw the little tuft of almond tree against the skyline.

The Marquis broke the silence in a loud and cheerful voice. "If anyone has any use for my left eyebrow," he said, "he can have it. Colonel Ducroix, do accept my left eyebrow! It's the kind of thing that might come in useful any day," and he gravely tore off one of his swarthy Assyrian brows, bringing about half his brown forehead with it, and politely offered it to the Colonel, who stood crimson and speechless with rage.

"If I had know," he spluttered, "that I was acting for a poltroon who pads himself to fight—"

"Oh, I know, I know!" said the Marquis, recklessly throwing various parts of himself right and left about the field. "You are making a mistake; but it can't be explained just now. I tell you the train has come into the station!"
The sun on the grass was dry and hot. So in plunging into the wood they had a cool shock of shadow, as of divers who plunge into a dim pool. The inside of the wood was full of shattered sunlight and shaken shadows. They made a sort of shuddering veil, almost recalling the dizziness of a cinematograph. Even the solid figures walking with him Syme could hardly see for the patterns of sun and shade that danced upon them... This wood of witchery, in which men’s faces turned black and white by turns, in which their figures first swelled into sunlight and then faded into formless night, this mere chaos of chiaroscuro (after the clear daylight outside), seemed to Syme a perfect symbol of the world in which he had been moving for three days, this world where men took off their beards and their spectacles and their noses, and turned into other people. That tragic self-confidence which he had felt when he believed that the Marquis was a devil had strangely disappeared now that he knew that the Marquis was a friend. He felt almost inclined to ask after all these bewilderments what was a friend and what was an enemy. Was there anything that was apart from what it seemed? The Marquis had taken off his nose and turned out to be a detective. Might he not just as well take off his head and turn out to be a hobgoblin? Was not everything, after all, like this bewildering woodland, this dance of dark and light? Everything was only a glimpse, the glimpse always unforeseen, and always forgotten. For Gabriel Syme had found in the heart of that sun-splashed wood what many modern painters had found there. He had found the thing which the modern people call Impressionism, which is another name for that final scepticism which can find no floor in the universe.
Syme turned to the Secretary, whose frightful mouth was almost foaming now, and held the lamp high with so rigid and arresting a gesture, that the man was, as it were, frozen for a moment, and forced to hear.

"Do you see this lantern?" cried Syme in a terrible voice. "Do you see the cross carved on it, and the flame inside? You did not make it. You did not light it. Better men than you, men who could believe and obey, twisted the entrails of iron and preserved the legend of fire. There is not a street you walk on, there is not a thread you wear, that was not made as this lantern was, by denying your philosophy of dirt and rats. You can make nothing. You can only destroy. You will destroy mankind; you will destroy the world. Let that suffice you. Yet this one old Christian lantern you shall not destroy."

"Swords!" shouted Syme, turning his flaming face to the three behind him. Let us charge these dogs, for our time has come to die."
Clean across the space of grass, about two hundred yards away, with a crowd screaming and scampering vainly at his heels, went a huge grey elephant at an awful stride, with his trunk thrown out as rigid as a ship's bowsprit, and trumpeting like the trumpet of doom. On the back of the bellowing and plunging animal sat President Sunday with all the placidity of a sultan, but goading the animal to a furious speed with some sharp object in his hand.
Dr. Bull –
“I always had a sympathy for old Sunday himself, wicked as he was. Just as if he was a great bouncing baby. How can I explain what my queer sympathy was? It didn’t prevent my fighting him like hell! Shall I make it clear if I say that I liked him because he was so fat?

The Secretary –
“You do not know Sunday at all. Perhaps it is because you are better than I, and do not know hell... For when I first saw Sunday he expressed to me, not your airy vitality, but something both gross and sad in the Nature of things... Then it broke upon me that the bestial mountain was shaking with a lonely laughter, and the laughter was at me. Do you ask me to forgive him that? It is no small thing to be laughed at by something at once lower and stronger than oneself.”

Inspector Ratcliffe –
“Surely you fellows are exaggerating wildly... But I’ll tell you what is a trifle creepy about Sunday. His room is neat, his clothes are neat, everything seems in order; but he’s absent-minded... Now absent-mindedness is just a bit too awful in a bad man. We can’t think of a wicked man who is honestly and sincerely dreamy, because we daren’t think of a wicked man alone with himself. An absent minded man means a good-natured man.

Mr. Gogol –
“I don’t think of Sunday on principle,” said Gogol simply, “any more than I stare at the sun at noonday.”

The Professor –
“My early life, as you know, was a bit too large and loose. Well, when I saw Sunday’s face I thought it was too large—everybody does, but I also thought it was too loose. The face was so big, that one couldn’t focus it or make it a face at all. The eye was so far away from the nose, that it wasn’t an eye... And so his face has made me, somehow, doubt whether there are any faces. I don’t know whether your face, Bull, is a face or a combination in perspective.
Perhaps one black disc of your beastly glasses is quite close and another fifty
miles away. Oh, the doubts of a materialist are not worth a dump. Sunday
has taught me the last and the worst of doubts, the doubts of a spiritualist. I
am a Buddhist, I suppose; and Buddhism is not a creed, it is a doubt. My
poor dear Bull, I do not believe that you really have a face. I have not faith
enough to believe in matter."

Syme -
"When I first saw Sunday," Said Syme slowly, "I only saw his back; and
when I saw his back, I knew he was the worst man in the world. His neck and
shoulders were brutal, like those of some apish god. His head had a stoop
that was hardly human, like the stoop of an ox."
"And then the queer thing happened. I had seen his back from the street, as
he sat in the balcony. Then I entered the hotel, and coming round the other
side of him, saw his face in the sunlight. His face frightened me, as it did
every one; but not because it was brutal, not because it was evil. On the
contrary, it frightened me because it was so beautiful, because it was so
good."
"It was like the face of some ancient archangel, judging justly after heroic
wars. There was laughter in the eyes, and in the mouth honour and sorrow.
There was the same white hair, the same great, grey-clad shoulders that I had
seen from behind. But when I saw him from behind I was certain he was an
animal, and when I saw him in front I knew he was a god."
"We will eat and drink later," Sunday said. "Let us remain together a little, we who have loved each other so sadly, and have fought so long. I seem to remember only centuries of heroic war, in which you were always heroes—epic on epic, iliad on ilian, and you always brothers in arms. Whether it was but recently (for time is nothing), or at the beginning of the world, I sent you out to war. I sat in the darkness, where there is not any created thing, and to you I was only a voice commanding valour and an unnatural virtue. You heard the voice in the dark, and you never heard it again. The sun in heaven denied it, the earth and sky denied it, all human wisdom denied it. And when I met you in daylight I denied it myself."
Dawn was breaking over everything in colours at once clear and timid; as if Nature made a first attempt at yellow and a first attempt at rose. A breeze blew so clean and sweet, that one could not think that it blew from the sky; it blew rather through some hole in the sky. Syme felt a simple surprise when he saw rising all round him on both sides of the road the red irregular buildings of Saffron Park. He had no idea that he had walked so near London. He walked by instinct along one white road, on which early birds hopped and sang, and found himself outside a fenced garden. There he saw the sister of Gregory, the girl with the gold-red hair, cutting lilac before breakfast, with the great unconscious gravity of a girl.