G.K. CHESTERTON'S THE MAN WHO WAS THURSDAY: THE BOOK OF JOB RETOLD

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Introduction

The story of Job always fascinates people, even those who are not into biblical studies. It resonates with many, for it is a tale of someone who suffers and yet remains faithful. One time or another we hear quoted—often with lines from the main character, the one of resignation at the beginning: "Naked I came forth from my mother's womb, and naked shall I go back again. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord!" (Job 2:21)

However, the rest of the book contains a richer part of the human (and divine!) drama. The poetic part that follows are better appreciated when we see it reflecting life. The problem of Job is the problem of the whole human race, of humanity in front of evil and suffering. This is the main problem of theodicy—the stuff of which many priests and church leaders preach. This problem is depicted in so many ways. Historical events, even those involving natural calamities, are often punctuated with a question mark at the end. That is why this problem of evil has become a theme in many discourses, writing, or other forms of expression. The Book of Job is retold over and over again.

Such is the theme of G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare*.[1] The novel is a retelling of the Book of Job. This short work intends to examine the novel and then compare it with the biblical work.

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[1] G[ilbert] K[eith] Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare in The Annotated Thursday*, annot. and ed. Martin Gardner (New York: Georges Borchardt, Inc. 1999).

The Man Who Was Thursday: The Book

The Author: G.K. Chesterton[2]

G[ilbert] K[eith] Chesterton (1874-1936) was a writer, journalist, apologist and illustrator. He was born in London and died in Beaconsfield. His life is divided into four periods: the first one, which was before the turn of the century, was characterized by idealism and romanticism. The second period was the time when he began to be recognized publicly. The way he is often portrayed is derived from this part of his life. The third period was one of crisis. It was the period of Chesterton the apologist and this time of his life was when he was at the threshold of his entry into the Catholic Church. This was when he called himself "an orthodox Christian." The last period began from his entry into the Catholic Church in 1922. His works from this time became more serious and more polemic. He was given the title the Defender of Catholic Faith by Pope Pius XI.

Setting

The setting of the novel is London at the turn-of-the-century (ca. 1900). The story spans several days, and it takes us to as far as Northern France. Some scenes are incongruous to achieve the surreal effect, since this is supposed to be a "nightmare." For this, the time setting is not given so much importance. The mood of the time of the day (e.g., the nighttime travel by ferry at the beginning and the twilight setting of the chase), however, does add much to achieve the surreal effect.

Characters

The following are the major characters of the novel.

Gabriel Syme (Thursday). He is the protagonist of the novel and appears all throughout, beginning as the other poet of Saffron Park. Chesterton called the novel "A Nightmare."

[2] What follows is taken from *A New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1967, s.v. "Chesterton, Gilbert Keith."

This nightmare belongs to Syme. He is described in the first chapter as "a very mild-looking mortal, with a fair, pointed beard and faint, yellow hair." He was said to be "less meek than he looked." He is one who works very hard to fight for his convictions.

Lucian Gregory. He is an anarchist, one of the two poets (the original one) of Saffron Park at the beginning of the novel. Chesterton describes him in the first chapter as "a man worth listening to, even if one only laughed at the end of it." He had an odd appearance: "[h]is dark red hair parted in the middle was literally like a woman's, and curved into the slow curls of a virgin in a pre-Raphaelite picture… He seemed like a walking blasphemy, a blend of the angel and the ape."

Sunday (the President). Through the eyes of Syme, we see that he is "a great mountain of a man…, like a statue carved deliberately as colossal. His head, crowned with white hair, as seen from behind looked bigger than a head ought to be… He was enlarged terribly to scale." In chapter 6, at the dinner, we see that he is one who continually looks at Syme (and perhaps at all the others).

Monday (the Secretary). He is the man with the crooked smile, a sinister looking fellow, a man whose face was emaciated, whose "eyes were alive with intellectual torture." He is perhaps, among characters in the novel, the most conscientious in carrying out his duties, or whatever is expected of him.

Tuesday (Gogol). He is the tousle-headed man who was "obviously mad," as he is described in the book. He has been badly disguised as a hairy Pole and he is the first one whose identity as a police detective is exposed.

Wednesday (Marquis de St. Eustache). He is "the only man at table who wore the fashionable clothes as if they were really his own." Indeed, he is elegant and passionate.

Friday (Professor de Worms). He is an old professor (which is actually the disguise), a very ancient one, indeed, who is revered by the others for his age.

Saturday (Dr. Bull). He is "the simplest and most baffling of all." He is a young doctor who carries his fine clothes with confidence and ease. The best feature that distinguishes him from the rest, that has become his reference point throughout the novel are his dark, opaque spectacles that evoked fear in those who looked at them.

Plot: A Synopsis of the Novel

The novel begins at Saffron Park where the poet, Lucian Gregory, is wont to speak before an audience. He is unchallenged until this particular evening, when another poet, Gabriel Syme, comes in and comes into an argument with him regarding the purpose of poetry. This man, Syme, has in fact, been recruited to a secret anti-anarchist force of the police.

The two afterwards spend some time in conversation and Gregory, in order to prove to Syme that he is an anarchist, takes him to a local anarchist meeting. Gregory, who was expecting to be elected to the central council, loses his slot to Syme who is asked to be in the council meeting.

He goes to the meeting place and sees the other members. Together with them, they are seven men with each one using the name of a day of the week as alias. Syme is named Thursday. In the course of the meeting, Sunday, the president, unmasks Tuesday as an undercover of the police. Eventually, in the course of the novel, Syme (as well as the others) discovers that five of the six other members are also undercover detectives.

Having discovered this, they all pursue Sunday whom they realize has put them all into this. In a dream within a dream scene, they all sit at table with the host Sunday. He opens the conversation and all the others say their piece, each of them questioning him. Syme delivers the clincher which can

very well be the climax of the novel: "Have you ever suffered?" Sunday responds, "Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of?" And the dream ends.

The denouement brings Syme back to London at the break of dawn in Saffron Park. This is where the novel ends.

Theme

The novel's constant refrain is anarchy (and in fact, it deals with anarchists) and the opening salvo, the conversation between the two poets at Saffron Park, is a debate about the antitheses, order versus anarchy. This makes us immediately think of what they stand for—many critics putting it as freedom versus determinism.

However, the novel is neither a view into anarchist thought nor a refutation of its principles. It goes deeper than these. It deals with the problem of natural evil. It is an exploration of the possible answer to the question "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Nay more, it does not look at the possible answers for there may be none. Rather, it puts forward the variety of ways that the question is asked and the different dispositions of the people who ask them. Above all, it looks at the relationship between God and the human being in the face of the evil in the world.

Thursday* vis-à-vis *The Book of Job

In the introduction to *The Annotated Thursday*, a recent edition of Chesterton's novel, Martin Gardner says that Chesterton wrote an introduction to the Book of Job. It is a wonder to see that *Thursday* is a modern retelling of The Book of Job. The following pages show the parallels between the novel and the Book of Job.[3]

[3] For ease of reading, in this section, all references to the locations in the book are placed in the main text as opposed to being footnoted.

The introduction to the discourse of Sunday to the six men may be considered parallel to that of God to Job. Aside from the fact that they usher in a discourse, the descriptions may also be rendered similarly: "like some enormous wave" and "storm:"

The Man Who Was Thursday	***The Book of Job***
Chapter 13, p. 224	Job 38:1
"I? What am I?" roared the President, and he rose slowly to an incredible height, like some enormous wave about to arch above them and break.	*Then the Lord addressed Job out of the storm and said: …*

The discourses following these are also parallel. Chesterton has obviously patterned his words from the words of God to Job in the final chapters of the book. The following passages are illustrative of this. Of course, Chesterton has tailored the discourse according to the situation of the novel and so it becomes rather limited, yet the desired effect is achieved:

The Man Who Was Thursday	***The Book of Job***
"You want to know what I am, do you? Bull, you are a man of science. Grub in the roots of those trees and find out the truth about them. Syme, you are a poet. Stare at those morning clouds. But I tell you this, that you will have found out the truth of the last tree and the top-most cloud before the truth about me. You will understand the sea, and I shall be still a riddle; you shall know what the stars are, and not know what I am.	*Gird up your loins now, like a man; I will question you, and you tell me the answers! Where were you when I founded the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its size; do you know? Who stretched out the measuring line for it? Into what were its pedestals sunk, and who laid the cornerstone, while the morning stars sang in chorus and all the sons of God shouted for joy?* (Job 38:3-7)

The Man Who Was Thursday

Since the beginning of the world all men have hunted me like a wolf—kings and sages, and poets and lawgivers, all the churches, and all the philosophies. But I have never been caught yet, and the skies will fall in the time I turn to bay. I have given them a good run for their money, and I will now." (Ch. 13, pp. 224-225)

There is **a plea for a response,** and this is addressed to Sunday (in the novel) and to God (in the Book of Job). It is basically the same, with both passages asking the addressee **whether he knows the situation of the one asking**: "Do you know who and what we are?" (p. 224) and "Does he not see my ways, and number all my steps?" (Job 31:4) Then these are punctuated with a plea for an answer:

The Man Who Was Thursday

"Who are you? What are you? Why did you get us all here? Do you know who and what we are? Are you a half-witted man playing the conspirator, or are you a clever man playing the fool? Answer me, I tell you." (Ch. 13, p. 224)

The Book of Job

But what is man's lot from God above, his inheritance from the Almighty on high? Is it not calamity for the unrighteous, and woe for evildoers? Does he not see my ways, and number all my steps? Let God weigh me in the scales of justice; thus will he know my innocence! … This is my final plea; let the Almighty answer me! (Job 31:2-6; 37)

Chesterton takes note of the mention of animals—lots of them—from the book of Job and from these I make the following observations:

The Man Who Was Thursday	*The Book of Job*
In chapter 13, the pursuit of Sunday brought the six men to the zoo, and they race in the midst of animals – "*a panorama of the strange animals in the cages.*" (Ch. 13, p. 232) Animals in their cages remind us of Job 37:8.	Job 38:39-39:30 which is part of God's response, is one replete with descriptions of animals: the lioness, the cock, the ravens, the mountain goats, the wild ass, the wild ox, the ostrich, the horse, the hawk, the eagle. There is even a preview of this from Elihu's lips some verses earlier: "*He shuts up all mankind indoors; the wild beasts take to cover and remain quietly in their dens.*" (Job 37:7-8)

Still on animals, two great ones are named in the book of Job. Size does matter! Chesterton compliments the size of Sunday himself, emphasizing this further with the appearance of the elephant:

The Man Who Was Thursday	*The Book of Job*
In the final chase in chapter 13, Sunday rides an elephant, "*a huge grey elephant at an awful stride, with his trunk thrown out as rigid as a ship's bowsprit, the trumpeting like the trumpet of doom.*" (Ch. 13, p. 231)	Job is "answered" by Behemoth in 40:15. He is likewise confronted with Leviathan. These two great creatures are great ones which God names to belittle Job (as Syme in the novel is belittled by the President with the elephant).

Incongruous—this is an adjective that can describe this "nightmare" by Chesterton. It is the same comment we can say about the life of the human being on earth. God's answers sometimes add to the enigma. Gardner, the one who did the annotation on Chesterton's novel, writes that Nature (or God) "is forever confronting scientists with the phenomena they cannot fathom… No one can discover the ultimate reasons for why the universe exists or why it is structured the way it is." (Introduction, p. 15) Here is a comparison:

The Man Who Was Thursday	*The Book of Job*
Throughout the chase, Sunday kept on throwing small pieces of paper to the pursuers. These contain short messages of varying length. The messages are incoherent, not to mention, puzzling (with Gardner describing them even as "nonsense," see Introduction, p. 15). (Ch. 13, pp. 226-237)	The book of Job all throughout is a puzzle, a question on the suffering of the just. It is, if one notices carefully, a string of questions—and interestingly, questions on the part of Job and on the part of God. Gardner mentions that the messages in the novel are parodies of God's "evasive, relevant replies to Job." (see Job 38-39)

The banquet, feast or dinner setting is an obvious parallel in both the novel of Chesterton and the book of Job. It seems that Chesterton took this element from Job and emphasized it in his novel.

The Man Who Was Thursday	*The Book of Job*
The first time the characters (Sunday to Saturday) are seen together, in their inaugural council meeting, they were at table and Chesterton even entitles the chapter "The Feast of Fear." (Chapter 5)	The book of Job underscores the importance of eating and drinking—right from the first chapter and following:

The Man Who Was Thursday	*The Book of Job*
There is the final scene in the novel where everyone is seated at table to dine. (Chapter 15)	*"His sons used to take turns giving feasts, sending invitations to their three sisters to eat and drink with them."* (Job 1:4) *"And so one day, while his sons and his daughters were eating and drinking wine in the house of their eldest brother…"* (Job 2:13) The first trial mentions eating and drinking more than once: *"Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the house of their eldest brother…."* (Job 2:18) The final scene is a banquet scene: **"***Then all his brethren and his sisters came to him, and all is former acquaintances, and they dined with him in his house."* (Job 42:11)

In the final chapter, in the banquet scene, Chesterton, through the lips of Dr. Bull, quotes the Book of Job directly. This was at the arrival of the poet Gregory, who said that he was the real anarchist.

The Man Who Was Thursday	*The Book of Job*
"And there came a day," murmured Bull, who seemed to have fallen asleep, "when the sons of God came before the Lord, and Satan also came with them." (p. 261)	*"One day, when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, Satan also came among them."* (Job 1:6)

As a final take, it is quite interesting to note the words of the poet Lucian Gregory at the last chapter, "The Accuser."

The Man Who Was Thursday	***The Book of Job***
"You never hated because you never lived. I know what you are all of you, from first to last – you are the people in power! You are the police – the great fat, smiling men in blue and buttons!	Gregory is accusing the detectives that they have never suffered. This is one mood that we see in the Book of Job: accusations.
But is there a free soul alive that does not long to break you, only because you have never been broken? We in revolt talk all kind of nonsense doubtless about this crime or that crime of the Government. It is all folly! The only crime of the Government is that it governs. The unpardonable sin of the supreme power is that it is supreme. I do not curse you for being cruel. I do not curse you (though I might) for being kind. I curse you for being safe! You sit in your chairs of stone, and have never come down from them. You are the seven angels of heaven, and you have had no troubles. Oh, I could forgive you everything, you that rule all mankind, if I could feel for once that you had suffered for one hour a real agony such as I…." (p. 262)	The friends of Job come to castigate him – that he is suffering because he has sinned. Add to this, on the other hand, the rantings of Job.

Conclusion

"Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of?"[4] This passage pulls the rug from beneath our feet. We will find this unexpected if we are reading the novel for the first time. All the time it was the book of Job that was at the back of our minds and then come these lines from the New Testament. The book of Job did not have any resolution like this. It exposes to us the thesis that even the just do suffer, but it is not resolved except for the fact that God is so great that we cannot put into question all that happens in our lives. And the novel provides an answer, albeit in a "*Deus ex machina*:" that God also suffers.

Chesterton proposes this conclusion. The sufferings of humanity are complemented by the suffering that God also endures. It is of this cup that we drink.

The subtitle of Chesterton's work likewise proposes another aspect of the conclusion. The novel is subtitled "A Nightmare." It is of our opinion that this title is appropriate—that the happenings in the novel are described as a nightmare because they would end in an awakening: that they would come to an end. Yes, sufferings will not endure; they will not be permanent.

The problem of evil in the world, the suffering of human beings, even if they are just, is a great theme because it is a theme that is real. The Book of Job and this book of Chesterton share this fact. The book of Job will always be retold because this is an imperfect world, a world that has no right to question God's creation, but nevertheless, a world with which God would also stoop to suffer.

[4] Chesterton, *Thursday*, 263.