Biographical Notes

The American humorist, James Thurber, was born in 1894 and grew up in Columbus, Ohio, in a rather eccentric family. He worked for various newspapers in Columbus, Paris and New York before finally joining The New Yorker, for which he produced most of his essays, short stories and drawings. Thurber's work has been described as a mixture of craziness, fantasy and irony. He is a sharp social commentator with a strong moral concern. His style is elegant and genteel. Many of his essays and stories deal with the triumph of moral values in the world of mass media, psycho-analysis and sexual revolution. James Thurber died in 1961.

Summary

Fill in the missing words:

acquainted - asylum - attractive – cheerful - correcting - impetuous – interrupting - know-all - protecting - qualified

Charlie Deshler was an ________________, self-assured man before he married Dorothy. Since her childhood Dorothy has been a _______________ who cannot help correcting and instructing other people. As she is quite good-looking, men have always found her _________________. Yet, although she stirs them up emotionally, mentally she completely wears them down because of her habit of constantly ________________ them.

Despite his friends' warnings Charlie Deshler marries Dorothy. At first he succeeds quite well in ________________ himself from her constant interference. Having travelled widely he can talk about things and places she is not ________________ with. However, as Dorothy gradually becomes familiar with her husband's stories it is possible for her to revert to her old habit of ________________ and correcting.

In vain Charlie seeks refuge in his dreams. They are the only stories he can tell without fear of interruption because only he can know about them. Gradually they become the only life he has that he can call his own. Finally Charlie has to be taken to a mental ________________. Yet even there he is not safe from his wife. When the narrator goes to visit him she is sitting by his bedside, as bright and ________________ as ever. When Charlie starts to tell his one remaining story she interrupts with, "No. You pulled over to a cloud. There aren't any curbs in the sky." The inevitable has happened: the dream has been repeated so often that Dorothy knows it by heart and feels completely ________________ to add her own corrections.
Unit I
The Development of the Story

Why did Charlie actually break down? Was it because of the personality clash between him and his wife? Or was it simply Charlie’s own fault for not being able to control her? Do you know anyone who behaves like Dorothy?

Write down your reactions to the story, giving reasons.

Unit II Charlie

Why does Charlie gradually retreat into a world of his own?

Why couldn't Charlie live in his fantastic dream world and remain sane?
Unit III

Points for further discussion
In one of his plays, "In Camera", also titled "Vicious Circle" (in French "Huis Clos") Sartre says "Hell is other people". How does this apply to Charlie's experience?

What would you have done if you had been Charlie? What should Dorothy's parents have done about her habit?

Which mannerisms in other people would make you feel as if you were in hell, like Charlie? Students could write these mannerisms down on a piece of paper, but without putting their name to it.

'Black humour' makes you feel like laughing, but sometimes the laughter is mixed with sadness. Why?