An Angel in Disguise: Background

"An Angel in Disguise" is a short story written in 1851 by American author Timothy Shay Arthur. The story is set against the backdrop of a poor rural village. It's the kind of place where everyone has problems of their own. Everyone tries to be good while living within their means. That's why the death of a drunken beggar woman brings little sympathy from the villagers. The three orphaned children she leaves behind, however, deserve charity because they can't fend for themselves. "An Angel in Disguise" touches the heartstrings, making readers question their capacity for charity and compassion.

**Theme:** Love can win over anything in the world.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WORD</th>
<th>MEANING</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wheelwright</td>
<td>someone who makes and repairs wooden wheels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘vinegar tempered’</td>
<td>not sweet-natured, someone who is not gentle and loving</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WORD</th>
<th>MEANING</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Idleness</td>
<td>having no employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vice</td>
<td>moral weakness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intemperance</td>
<td>excessive in behaviour</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wretched</td>
<td>miserable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threshold</td>
<td>the entrance, doorway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Despised</td>
<td>hated</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scoffed at</td>
<td>laughed at</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denounced</td>
<td>criticized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denunciation</td>
<td>publically criticized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hastily</td>
<td>hurriedly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumble-down</td>
<td>broken down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grave</td>
<td>sober</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interment</td>
<td>burial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stout</td>
<td>big built</td>
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Q1. ‘Death touches the spring of our common humanity’. Explain.

Ans: This means that all of humanity is affected by death. All men and women are like flowers disguised in the spring season. Death is the suffering that withers/decays these flowers. All humans in this world, irrespective of their colour, religion, nationality, financial status, have to die one day. One common factor among all humans is death.
Q2. How did the neighbours react to the death of the woman? How was she treated when she was alive? Why?

Ans: The neighbours were overcome with pity for the dead woman. They tried to do whatever they could for the dead woman and her children. Some brought sober clothes for a decent burial of the body, some came with food for the starving children. When she was alive, she had been despised, laughed at and angrily denounced by nearly every man, woman and child in the village. The woman was hated by all the villagers when she was alive because she was careless with the upbringing of her own children. She did not do anything to earn a living, she consumed alcohol and lead an immoral life.

Q3. Describe the three children.

Ans: John, the oldest, was twelve years of age, big-built and strong enough to earn his living. Kate was between ten and eleven. She was a bright, active girl who could be molded into a clever young lady if she got the opportunity. The youngest, Maggie, was physically disabled when she fell from a window two years ago and injured her spine. She was bedridden and had to be lifted in the arms to be taken from one pace to another.

Q4. What was the issue that bothered the villagers?

Ans: The villagers were concerned about the fate of the children now that their mother was dead.

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Wan pale and sickly
Wasted bony, skeletal
Soiled dirty
Ragged torn
Attire dress
Poorhouse housing for poor and homeless
Hovel hut, shack
Pauper poor

Q1. What was the fate of the children after their mother was taken for burial?

Ans: The villagers decided not to leave the children to starve. John was taken by farmer Jones. Kate was to be looked after by Mrs. Ellis. Though all looked at Maggie with pitying glances, no one stepped forward to take her. No one wanted the responsibility of a bedridden child. They unanimously decided that she must be sent to the poorhouse.
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Resolutely    firmly
Refraining  resisting
Puzzled    confused
Had a heart  was kind hearted
Hoarded    saved for later

Q1. How do you think Maggie felt on being left all alone?
Ans: Maggie must have felt fear on being left all alone. Her brother and sister were taken away, this must have made her feel insecure and unsure about her own survival. She frantically cried out to Joe Thompson not to leave her alone in the shack.

Q2. What kind of a person was Joe Thompson?
Ans: Joe Thompson was a kind-hearted man. He liked children. He did not leave Maggie by herself because he realized that she couldn’t survive alone. He knew that he would face anger and resentment from his wife, but he still carried Maggie home.

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With ruffling feathers  with anger
Corded       roped
Start       move in shock
Face was in a flame  red-coloured due to anger
Rigidly    strongly
Non-combative  not getting into a fight
Fired up   got angry and ready to argue
Countenance  appearance
Resolute    unhesitating

Q1. How was Joe greeted by his wife?
Ans: Mrs. Thompson saw him approaching from the window and she met him a few paces from the door. She was very angry when she saw him carrying Maggie.

Q4. Why is Maggie a ‘precious burden’?
Ans: Here Maggie is called the “precious burden”. The burden refers to the fact that a bed-ridden child usually is a burden where she requires constant care and support from whoever takes her in. The burden is called precious because Maggie brought about happiness into the lives of the childless couple by giving them a reason to love and someone to care for. Mrs. Thompson carries her as a precious burden in her heart as well as in her arms. Maggie acts as “the honey to the soul” of Mrs. Thompson as she looks to her with love, patience and gratitude.
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Indignation      anger
Sun not an hour in the sky       dusk
Gainsaying          challenging
Irrepressible       uncontrollable
Put it off         postpone
Rebuked            punished

Q1. What did Joe say about the poorhouse that couldn’t be challenged by his wife?
Ans: Joe said that in order to be admitted to the poorhouse, the officials had to be first informed and a permit must be obtained.

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Moisture       tears
Unwonted       out of the ordinary
Eloquence      powerful and effective language
Chamber        room

Q1 How did Joe assume that his wife’s state had changed?
Ans: On seeing her strong and rough husband getting emotional while talking about the helpless, disabled orphan, Mrs. Thompson started to soften towards the child. Joe’s soft, kind-hearted words changed her and when she turned towards the little chamber where her husband had deposited Maggie, Joe saw that her state had changed.

Q2. Why did Joe consider the light shining through the windows ‘a good omen’?
Ans: Joe Thompson put Maggie in the little chamber of his house before going to his shop. While returning in the evening, a light shining through the little chamber windows was the first object that attracted his attention. He considered the light to be a good sign because it indicated that his wife, Jane Thompson might be there taking care of the poor little girl, Maggie. Jane was a short-tempered woman and was not happy in Joe’s decision to bring Maggie home after her mother’s death. But Joe was compassionate to the girl and wanted to convince his wife to keep the child with them. So, the light coming from the chamber aroused hope in his heart that his wife might have developed some soft corner for the girl and would be willing to accept her in her home.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intercourse</th>
<th>communication, conversation, interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tread</td>
<td>step</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manifest</td>
<td>show by one’s behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asperity</td>
<td>harshness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obliterate</td>
<td>destroy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quivered</td>
<td>shivered, shook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intently</td>
<td>with eager attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bustle about</td>
<td>move busily</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Q1.** What made Joe feel as if a weight lifted itself from his heart?

Ans: When Joe came back from his shop, he tried to ascertain the connection between his wife and Maggie by reading the expressions in Maggie’s eyes. He saw that her eyes were intently fixed upon his wife, that now and then she spoke a few words, that her expression was sad and tender but he saw nothing of bitterness or pain. He felt relieved, as if a weight lifted itself from his heart.

**Q2.** What did Joe observe about Maggie?

Ans: Joe observed that she had a pair of large, bright eyes that looked up at him with love, gratitude and in a pleading manner. He saw that Maggie had an attractive face, full of childish sweetness which suffering had not been able to destroy.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effort at indifference</th>
<th>tried to pretend as if she didn’t care</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coldness was assumed</td>
<td>lack of affection was a pretense</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maintained a like reserve</th>
<th>maintained a similar, uncommunicative stand</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sonic moments</td>
<td>few moments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relish</td>
<td>enjoyment, enthusiasm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slumbering</td>
<td>state of rest, asleep</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Q1.** Why didn’t Joe go to meet the Guardians of the poor about Maggie?

Ans: Jane, Joe’s wife, had taken a liking to Maggie. With her innocence and affection, Maggie had managed to arouse the dormant feelings of love in her. Jane was so engrossed in the care of the weak and helpless Maggie that the childless couple conveniently forgot about sending her to the poorhouse.

**Q5.** What made Jane Thompson keep Maggie in her house?

Ans: Maggie was too weak and helpless. She was an expression of love and affection and that made Jane Thompson keep her in her house.
Q1. 'There was not a man in all the neighbourhood who drank daily of a more precious wine of life than he.' Explain this with reference to context.

Ans: This has been said for Joe Thompson. Ever since Maggie had come into his house, there was love, peace and a certain sense of satisfaction that had been missing in the couple's life. There was a drastic change in his wife. From being a self-centered, angry, irritable and ill-tempered person, she had turned into a loving and caring person. Maggie had come into his house as an angel, disguised as a sick, helpless child and filled all the sad and gloomy corners of his house with the sunshine of love. All this made Joe Thompson the happiest and most content man in the village, every day for him was now better that the last. He was happy and satisfied with his life.

Q2. Justify the title of the story, 'An angel in disguise'.

Ans: Arthur’s story “An Angel in Disguise” is all about a little, crippled, orphan girl called Maggie and how she brought back joy and happiness to the childless Thompson family. Though she was a sick, helpless, and miserable child at the beginning of the story, in the end she filled the lives of Joe and Jane Thompson with the “sunshine of love”. Maggie turned out to be an angel in disguise for the Thompson family.

Again, when the girl was unattended after her mother’s death and was in a sad state, Joe Thompson reached to her as an angel in disguise, took her to his home and gave her a completely new life.

From both angles, the title is symbolic and suggestive of the theme of the story. Thus, the title of the story “An Angel in Disguise” is just and apt.

Q3. How is Joe Thompson also an angel in disguise for Maggie?

Ans: In the story “An angel in disguise”, Joe Thompson, a wheelwright, though rough in exterior had a heart which was tender. He liked children and was pleased to have them come to his shop.

While the news of the lady’s death spreads throughout the village, everyone was eager to take John and Kate but none wanted a bed-ridden child. Hence, they all decided to send her to the poorhouse.

As the dead was taken to its grave, everyone went out ignoring the sad glances of Maggie. At that moment, an odd terror arose upon Maggie’s face and she cried out for Mr. Thomson not to leave her alone.

At that point of time, Mr. Thomson was the only one who lifted her from such a miserable condition and paved a path for her new life. Hence, Mr. Thomson appeared to be “An Angel in Disguise” for Maggie to pick her up from such a miserable condition and for providing shelter to her at his own house along with a mother.
Q4. What type of a person was Mrs. Thompson before Maggie came into her life?

Ans: Before the poor little girl called Maggie came into Jane’s life, she was a ‘vinegar-tempered wife’ to Joe Thompson. She was “not a woman of saintly temper, nor much given to self-denial for others’ good”, as the narrator comments. As a childless woman she had “nothing to love and care for out of herself, and so became sore, irritable, ill-tempered, and self-afflicting in the desolation of her woman’s nature”.