

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty



by James Thurber

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The Secret Life of Walter Mitty: Introduction

James Thurber is one of America's best known humorists, and "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" is his best known story. The story was first published in 1939 in the *New Yorker* magazine to great acclaim. It was reprinted in Thurber's 1942 collection, *My World—And Welcome To It* and in *Reader's Digest* in 1943. The story's main character is a middle-aged, middle-class man who escapes from the routine drudgery of his suburban life into fantasies of heroic conquest. Upon the story's publication, Walter Mitty became an archetypal American figure. Today, people still describe a certain kind of neurotic, daydreaming man as a "Walter Mitty type." In 1947, Hollywood released a movie of the same title, starring Danny Kaye and Virginia Mayo.

Although his humorous stories, sketches, and illustrations were well-known during his lifetime, Thurber has

received little scholarly attention. Some critics dismissed his work as little more than formulaic and whimsical. More recently, critics have become attentive to Thurber's literary prowess, such as his use of wordplay and attention to narrative form. They have also discussed the darker themes of his work which lurk underneath the hilarity. Others, referring to his tendency to portray domineering women, like Mrs. Mitty, and unhappy, ineffectual men, like Walter, fault his treatment of women and views of marriage.

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty: James Thurber Biography

James Thurber was a prolific writer and artist who published over twenty books of stories, biographies, drawings, sketches, essays, poetry, fables and cartoons. During the 1920s and 1930s, Thurber wrote for the popular and influential literary magazine *The New Yorker*. His work for the magazine established his reputation as a comic with a sophisticated sensibility who largely wrote about upper middle-class intellectuals. Much of his work focused on the milieu of East Coast society.

Thurber was born in Columbus, Ohio, in 1894, and some of his writing, such as his "mock" memoirs, *My Life and Hard Times*, treat his experiences as a boy growing up in Ohio. After attending Ohio State University, he worked as a newspaper reporter in Ohio, France, and New York before joining the staff of the *The New Yorker* in 1927. As a writer and editor at *The New Yorker*, Thurber worked with the versatile writer E. B. White, who wrote the well-known children's favorite *Charlotte's Web* and other works. White's literary skill influenced Thurber's craft. Thurber wrote fifteen drafts of "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," a story of five pages, before he submitted it for publication.

Thurber gained recognition for his work from Williams College and Yale University, which awarded him honorary degrees, and his drawings were exhibited in international art shows. Regarded primarily as a humorist, Thurber's reputation as a serious writer has suffered somewhat. Critical attention has focused largely on the comic aspect of his writing and not on the deeper themes and social satire present in his work.

Thurber married twice. His first marriage to Althea Adams lasted thirteen years and produced a daughter. After they divorced, he married Helen Wismer. In the 1940s, Thurber began losing his vision. Eventually, he went completely blind. In his later years, depressed by his health and by the anticommunist movement of the 1950s, which he opposed, Thurber's writing became more pessimistic. He died in 1961.

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty: Summary

As "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" begins, a military officer orders an airplane crew to proceed with a flight through a dangerous storm. The crewmembers are scared but are buoyed by their commander's confidence, and they express their faith in him. Suddenly, the setting switches to an ordinary highway, where Walter Mitty and his wife are driving into a city to run errands. The scene on the airplane is revealed to be one of Mitty's many fantasies.

Mitty's wife observes that he seems tense, and when he drops her off in front of a hair styling salon, she reminds him to go buy overshoes and advises him to put on his gloves. He drives away toward a parking lot and loses himself in another fantasy. In this daydream he is a brilliant doctor, called upon to perform an operation on a prominent banker. His thoughts are interrupted by the attendant at the parking lot, where Mitty is trying to enter through the exit lane. He has trouble backing out to get into the proper lane, and the attendant has to take the wheel. Mitty walks away, resentful of the attendant's skill and self-assurance.

Next, Mitty finds a shoe store and buys overshoes. He is trying to remember what else his wife wanted him to buy when he hears a newsboy shouting about a trial, which sends Mitty into another daydream. Mitty is on the witness stand in a courtroom. He identifies a gun as his own and reveals that he is a skillful marksman. His

testimony causes a disturbance in the courtroom. An attractive young woman falls into his arms; the district attorney strikes her and Mitty punches him. This time Mitty brings himself out of his reverie by remembering what he was supposed to buy. "Puppy biscuit," he says aloud, leading a woman on the street to laugh and tell her friend, "That man said 'Puppy biscuit' to himself."

Mitty then goes to a grocery store for the dog biscuits and makes his way to the hotel lobby where he has arranged to meet his wife. He sits in a chair and picks up a magazine that carries a story about airborne warfare. He begins to daydream again, seeing himself as a heroic bomber pilot about to go on a dangerous mission. He is brave and lighthearted as he prepares to risk his life.

He returns to the real world when his wife claps him on the shoulder. She is full of questions, and he explains to her that he was thinking. "Does it ever occur to you that I am sometimes thinking?" he says. She replies that she plans to take his temperature when they get home. They leave the hotel and walk toward the parking lot. She darts into a drugstore for one last purchase, and Mitty remains on the street as it begins to rain. He lights a cigarette imagines himself smoking it in front of a firing squad. He tosses the cigarette away and faces the guns courageously—"Walter Mitty the Undefeated, inscrutable to the last."

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty: Characters

Mrs. Mitty

Mrs. Mitty is Walter's dominating wife. She nags him to buy galoshes, to put on his gloves, and to drive more slowly. When she asks Walter why he did not put on his overshoes before leaving the store, he responds with irritation: "I was thinking...does it ever occur to you that I am sometimes thinking?" But while Mrs. Mitty may appear overly controlling and condescending, Walter is incompetent and refuses to shoulder adult responsibility. Mrs. Mitty is Walter's link to reality; she prevents accidents and helps Walter avoid losing his grasp of everyday life.

Walter Mitty

Walter Mitty is a daydreamer who imagines himself the hero of his fantasies as a navy pilot commander, doctor, sharpshooter, bomber pilot, and noble victim of a firing squad. Mitty is married to a woman who treats him more like a child than a husband. This is due to his immature tendency to escape into fantasies rather than live in the real world. He is constantly being upbraided by policemen, parking lot attendants, and his wife for his erratic, distracted behavior. Thurber's characterization of this neurotic man whose wife dominates him, who cannot fix his own car, and who lives in dreams has become an archetypal figure of the ineffectual, weak-willed, bumbling male in American culture.

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty: Themes

Walter Mitty is an ordinary character who fills his mind with fantasies in which he plays the hero, saves lives, navigates enemy territory, and proves his masculinity.

Success and Failure

The theme of success and failure is examined through Mitty's inability to live a fulfilling external life, which causes him to retreat to an internal life full of images of conquest. Walter Mitty is neither exciting nor successful in his everyday life. In fact, the world Mitty lives in seems hellish to him. His wife's nagging voice awakens him from one dream. Like his wife, parking lot attendants and policemen admonish him, and women at the grocery store laugh at him. A bumbling, ineffectual man scorned by others, he feels humiliated by the knowing grins of garage mechanics who know he cannot take the chains off his car's tires. To avoid their sneers, he imagines taking the car into the garage with his arm in a sling so "they'll see I couldn't possibly take the chains off myself."

The failures of his everyday life are countered by the extraordinary successes he plays out in his fantasy life. Mitty is always the stunning hero of his dreams: he flies a plane through horrendous weather and saves the crew; he saves a millionaire banker with his dexterity and common sense in surgery; he stuns a courtroom with tales of his snapshooting; and he fearlessly faces a firing squad. Although he always forgets what his wife wants him to pick up at the store and he waits for her in the wrong part of the hotel lobby, Walter is alert, courageous and at the center of attention in his dreams. Thurber suggests that this ordinary man who hates the reality of middle-class life and his own shortcomings prefers to live in his imagination.

Gender Roles

Walter's failures in life and his successes in dreams are closely connected with gender roles. Everyday life for him consists of being ridiculed by women, such as the one who hears him mutter "puppy biscuit" on the street and his wife who nags him. Among women, Walter is subservient and the object of derision. Among men, Walter fails to meet traditional expectations of masculinity. He is embarrassed by his mechanical ineptitude: when he tries to remove the chains from his tires, he ends up winding them around the axles, and he has to send for a towtruck. The mechanic who arrives is described as "young" and "grinning." The description implies that the man, younger and more virile, is laughing at Walter's ignorance of cars and makes Walter feel emasculated, or less of a man. Walter resolves that the next time he takes the car to the shop to have the chains removed, he will cover his shame by wearing his right arm in a sling.

Walter compensates for his failure to fulfill conventional expectations of masculinity in his daydreams. All of his fantasies center around feats of traditionally masculine prowess, and many of them involve violence. He can hit a target three hundred feet away with his left hand, fix sophisticated machinery with a common fountain pen, and walk bravely into battle in his fantasy worlds. Thurber's exploration of sex roles in modern America can be understood in various ways: Thurber might be suggesting that men have become weak and ineffectual and women overly aggressive, or he may be pointing to a lack of opportunities for men to perform meaningful, heroic action in modern, suburban, middle-class America.

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty: Style

Narration

In "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," Thurber tells the story of Walter Mitty, a man who lives in a dream world to escape from the routines and humiliations he suffers in everyday life. The action takes place over the course of a single day, during which Walter Mitty and his wife go on their weekly shopping trip. Walter slips into his daydreams, only to be awakened when he has made an error in judgment, such as speeding or driving on the wrong side of the road.

Thurber has carefully constructed the story's narrative to connect Mitty's "secret life" with his external life. In the first dream sequence, Walter is a naval commander who sails his hydroplane at full speed to avoid a hurricane. The dream abruptly ends when his wife admonishes him for driving too quickly, implying that Walter's dream led to his speeding. The second dream begins when his wife notes that he is tense, and asks him to see a doctor. Hearing the name of the doctor sends Walter Mitty into dreaming that he is a famous surgeon who assists in saving the life of a wealthy patient, a banker named Wellington MacMillan. Each of the dreams, then, begins with some detail from Walter's everyday life. Walter transforms insignificant comments, sounds or objects into major props in his heroic conquests. The same details from reality force him out of his dream world. Significantly, the story opens and closes in the middle of dream sequences, as if to emphasize their priority over reality for Walter. It is left to the reader to consider the importance of the last scene, in which Walter bravely faces a firing squad without a blindfold. Thurber's narrative proficiency is such that he actually writes six stories within one. None of the mini-narratives have decisive conclusions: each of the dream sequences, like the entire story, is an abbreviated short story with no clear beginning or end.

Point of View

Linked to his use of narration, Thurber uses an unusual point of view in "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty." The story is told in the third-person, but the reader has access to Mitty's thoughts. The dream sequences complicate this third-person limited point of view. During these sections of the story, readers are inside of Walter's fantasy. His conscious thoughts are on display. He wonders what he was supposed to buy at the store. Readers also have access to another level of Mitty's consciousness during the dream sequences. Here, Walter's thoughts are projected into narrative action. Thurber shifts from one level of awareness to another without confusing the reader.

Wordplay

Thurber has been praised for his use of extravagant wordplay and literary allusions. Noted primarily for his light sketches and humorous line drawings, Thurber did not receive a great deal of serious critical appraisal during his career. However, later critics have commented on his bitter political and social commentary and the latent, darker themes in his work. Through his use of humor and wit, Thurber was able to explore the conflicts and neurotic tensions of modern life. Mitty's misuse of words such as "coreopsis" and "obstreosis" in "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" is a typical example of how Thurber employed speech to great effect. Humorous distortions of medical terms, technological advancements, and items of warfare make Mitty's portrayal accurate, lifelike, and believable. During his courtroom daydream, Mitty is called upon to identify a gun known as a "Webley-Vickers 50.80." This is another instance where Thurber twists words to enrich the depiction of Mitty's character. Carl M. Lindner asserts that this distortion of a brand-name (probably Smith and Wesson—a well-known gun manufacturer) demonstrates Mitty's "ignorance of the heroic experience" and amuses readers at the same time. Thurber used such distortions of speech and reality to effectively depict the absurdities of the human condition.

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty: Historical Context

War Fantasies

"The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" was first published in 1939, the year World War II began. German troops invaded Poland, the Germans and the Soviets signed a Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact, and Germany and Italy formed the Pact of Steel Alliance. While the Axis powers were consolidating, Britain and France declared war on Germany. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared U.S. neutrality in the war, but the United States entered the war in 1941 when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Roosevelt, at the suggestion of Albert Einstein, ordered a U.S. effort to build an atomic bomb. In Spain, the forces of fascist Francisco Franco captured Madrid, ending the Spanish Civil War. While Walter Mitty, a middle-aged man, dreams of being a captain in the First World War, the dream is triggered by his reading an article intimating World War II in *Liberty* magazine entitled, "Can Germany Conquer the World Through the Air?" The articles contain "pictures of bombing planes and of ruined streets." In the late 1930s and early 1940s, American men like Walter Mitty had to confront their fears of and desires for proving their manhood in battle.

Modernism

Thurber's use of wordplay and exploration of the absurdity of modern life has been noted for its affinities with modernist writing. Modernists played with conventional narrative form and dialogue, attempting to approximate subjective thought and experience. Thurber's narrative technique has been compared to the writings of William Faulkner, whose novels *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August* were published in the 1930s. Thurber's playful use of words and themes of absurdity also show the influence of the poet Wallace Stevens, whose book of verse, *The Man with the Blue Guitar* was published in 1937.

Towards the end of the story, Walter comments that "things close in," which, according to Carl M. Lindner, represents the suffocating effects of modern life on "the Romantic individual." That the world was changing

due to technological, economic, and social developments (think of Walter's problems fixing his car, for example) is reflected in the opening of the 1939-40 New York World's Fair, whose theme was "The World of Tomorrow."

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty: Critical Overview

"The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" is Thurber's best-known short story. Walter Mitty has become a well-known character in American fiction. The tenth edition of the *Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary* defines a "Walter Mitty" as "a commonplace unadventurous person who seeks escape from reality through daydreaming." Walter Mitty, the average, ineffectual American is a recurring character-type in Thurber's fiction. Critics refer to this type of character as the "Thurber male."

However, critics are divided on how to interpret this Thurberian character. On the one hand, Richard C. Tobias's *The Art of James Thurber* views Thurber as a cerebral comic writer, whose protagonists defeat humdrum reality with their imaginations. On the other hand, Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill discuss Thurber's bleak comic sensibility in their book, *America's Humor*. Characters like Mitty, Blair argues, let their neurotic fears defeat them, and are unable to cope with the world. In *The Georgia Review*, Carl M. Lindner sees Walter Mitty as the latest in a line of American male heroes, such as Rip Van Winkle and Tom Sawyer. Like these archetypal comic figures, Mitty chooses to escape society rather than confront it. Refusing to accept adult responsibility, Lindner argues, these figures of masculinity regress to boyish behavior.

Critics disagree about Thurber's portrayal of women as well. Commentators such as Blair and Hill consider him a misogynist—a person who hates women. Viewing Mrs. Mitty as the one responsible for Walter's loss of independence and his inability to function, such critics believe Thurber was opposed to strong, empowered female characters. Tobias, on the other hand, praises Thurber's assertive female characters. Critics who analyze Thurber's stories as lightly comic and triumphant are more likely to regard favorably his depictions of women; those who concentrate on his darker themes point to his negative portrayals of women.

Another issue which recurs in critical discussion is Thurber's view of modern life and his technique in portraying it. His writing has been compared to that of modernist writers such as William Faulkner, James Joyce and T. S. Eliot. His use of wordplay, integration of different narrative consciousnesses, and treatment of the absurdity of modern life connect Thurber's fiction to modernism. Robert Morseberger, in his monograph, *James Thurber*, characterizes Thurber as a Romantic writer, one who opposes technological advances and rationality and believes in the mind's ability to provide an escape from the destructive forces of society. In an essay in the *English Journal*, Carl Sundell discusses the "architectural design" of "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty." He notes that Thurber addresses four of the five major types of conflict found in fiction: Man vs. Man, Man vs. Society, Man vs. Self and Man vs. Nature. Sundell compares Thurber's ability to elicit the sympathy of the reader in "Mitty" to J. D. Salinger's portrayal of Holden Caulfield, the protagonist in the novel *Catcher in the Rye*. He notes that, like Holden, Walter seems to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Unlike the adolescent Caulfield, though, Walter is an adult, and thus his chronic daydreaming merits less sympathy from the reader.

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty: Essays and Criticism

The Universal Appeal of the Main Character

Walter Mitty is one of literature's great dreamers. He spends much of his time escaping into fantasies in which he is brilliant and heroic, and his life is dramatic and adventurous. The enduring popularity of "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" is undoubtedly due in great part to readers' ability to identify with Mitty; after all, most

of us find our lives at times mundane and unsatisfying, and use daydreams to enter a more interesting world.

Mitty is, of course, an extreme case when it comes to daydreaming. In the single afternoon covered by the story's action, he imagines he is a prominent surgeon operating on a millionaire; a skilled marksman providing testimony in a sensational trial; a courageous warrior of the air (twice); and a condemned man bravely facing a firing squad.

Numerous critics have pointed to Mitty as a prime example of modern man, trapped in a world that is full of dull responsibilities and offers few possibilities for adventure—or, at least, offers these possibilities only to the few. Mitty dreams of flying planes in hazardous conditions and causing scenes in courtrooms, but his life consists of buying overshoes and waiting for his wife to have her hair done. In his fantasies, not only is his life exciting, but his imagined persona is heroic and resourceful as well. In his daydreams he is a figure larger than life, unflappable and in control of every situation; in reality he is a character critics have dubbed the "little man," ineffectual and somewhat ridiculous. He inspires feelings of superiority in garage attendants. When he remembers that he is supposed to buy puppy biscuit, he says the words aloud, leading a passer-by to laugh and remark to her companion, "That man said 'Puppy biscuit' to himself." Even a revolving door seems to mock him; it makes a "faintly derisive" noise when pushed. Mitty's mental meanderings also have something to do with asserting his manhood, at least a stereotypical idea of manhood. He fantasizes about excelling at what are considered "masculine" pursuits having to do with guns and bombs; in reality, he has trouble taking the chains off his car's tires.

Scholar Carl M. Lindner asserts in an essay in *The Georgia Review* that the forces that induce Mitty to daydream include the development of urban, industrial society. When the United States was a young country, with an untamed frontier, there were far more opportunities for heroic action—or, at least, there seemed to be, Lindner notes. Also, literature and legend immortalized many frontier heroes, whether fictional creations such as James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo or real historical figures such as Davy Crockett (whose accomplishments were heavily exaggerated, so that he now seems almost like a fictional character). "With the frontier gone, and physical and psychological space limited, the typical male is reduced to fantasy-visions as outlets for that action which is now denied him," Lindner states. Whether Mitty actually would become a hero if possibilities for action were available to him is open to question; he appears to lack capability as well as opportunity. Some critics have contended Mitty's inability to deal with life is the natural result of the modern world's stresses on the individual. In James Thurber's vision, this world is "Hell for the Romantic individual," comments Lindner. However, in the estimation of another critic, Ann Ferguson Mann, Mitty has merely abdicated responsibility for his life. In her essay in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Mann writes: "What Thurber's story can show us, while it delights us with its clever humor, is that what traps the Walter Mittys of this world and insures that they will remain 'little men' is their own limited view of themselves and others."

Mann's view diverges from a widely held assertion that holds Mitty's wife responsible for his predicament as well as blaming contemporary society. In his stories and cartoons, Thurber often portrayed women, especially wives, as dominating and menacing creatures, breaking the spirit of the men in their lives. Critic Norris Yates gives an interpretation of Thurber's viewpoint in his book entitled *American Humorist; Conscience of the Twentieth Century*. Yates writes: "Thurber feels that the male animal is unduly repressed by his environment, an environment which contains another animal, his wife, who both abets and conceals her ruthlessness by means of more resolution, solicitude for her mate, and competence in the small matters of everyday living than he shows." Certainly, this description fits Mrs. Mitty in some ways. She obviously worries about Walter's health and welfare; she observes that he is nervous, suggests a visit to a doctor, notes that she intends to check his temperature when they return home, and reminds him to wear his gloves and buy overshoes. The fact that she would have to remind him of these things is a sign that she is indeed more competent than he, and is constantly concerned about his well being. Another indication of her competence is that she notices when he is driving too fast. She also seems not to understand his need for escapism; he wonders if she realizes that he is sometimes thinking.

Mann makes a rather convincing argument in that Mrs. Mitty's actions can be seen as quite understandable and even praise worthy. "No critics and few readers of the story have tried to imagine the difficulties of living with Walter Mitty," Mann comments. Indeed, the story contains ample evidence that Mitty would try a mate's patience. He has trouble remembering the errands he is supposed to run. He rebels at the idea of dressing properly for winter. He is an inept driver. And he slides into his fantasies with little provocation. It has fallen to Mrs. Mitty (Thurber gives her no first name) to manage the details of Walter's life. "She is there to keep him from driving too fast, to get him to wear gloves and overshoes, to take him to the doctor, but, most importantly, to free him from all the practical responsibilities of living so that he can pursue his real career—his fantasy life," notes Mann. "It is not inconceivable that Mitty, the architect of so many intricate fantasies, unconsciously chose for himself a wife like Mrs. Mitty."

This rather positive view of Mrs. Mitty is not only at odds with that held by many other critics, but also might surprise Thurber, given that much of his work contained negative portraits of women. Late in his career, however, Thurber contended he was not a misogynist. Yates points to a statement Thurber wrote in 1953: "If I have sometimes seemed to make fun of Woman, I assure you it has been only for the purpose of egging her on." Additionally, stories can be interpreted in many ways, not limited to what the author may have intended.

In the end, it is possible to sympathize with both Walter and Mrs. Mitty. It is understandable that he would want to find in his fantasies what he lacks in life; it is also easy to see that she would have to be the more responsible member of the couple, and that she would sometimes have to play the unpopular role of disciplinarian. He needs someone to take care of him; perhaps she needs to take care of someone. Therefore, each fulfills a need for the other. Readers may be able to identify with Mrs. Mitty to some extent. This is limited, however, because she is rather sketchily drawn, because her role in the story is secondary to Walter's, and because dreamers are generally more appealing than are earthbound, practical people. Walter remains the story's primary audience-identification figure.

Readers are able to identify with Mitty not only because of the fact that he fantasizes, but also because of the content of his fantasies. The content is familiar, as it is drawn from American popular culture. His military scenarios are full of clichés from war films. The courtroom scene could be from a low-budget 1940s mystery movie or a paperback crime novel. The firing-squad ending could come from a movie, too. And the medical fantasy is pure soap opera. Some critics have pointed out that the daydream sequences show Thurber's skill as a parodist—a skill he also displayed in *Fables For Our Time* and other works. Consider these lines from Mitty's dream of being a naval aviator, flying through a severe storm: "The crew ... looked at each other and grinned. 'The Old Man'll get us through,' they said to one another. 'The Old Man ain't afraid of hell.'" Or these from the trial fantasy: "Pandemonium broke loose in the courtroom. A woman's scream rose above the bedlam and suddenly a lovely, dark-haired girl was in Mitty's arms. The District Attorney struck at her savagely. Without rising from his chair, Mitty let the man have it on the point of the chin. 'You miserable cur!'" Thurber takes material that is familiar to the audience and makes it hilarious through exaggeration. The fantasy scenes also contain humor based on made-up and misused words; for instance, Mitty imagines himself to be a doctor dealing with diseases called obstreosis and streptothricosis (both fabricated words), as well as coreopsis (really a genus of herb). Several critics interpret the clichéd content and twisted vocabulary of Mitty's daydreams as revealing the limitations of his experience, Lindner notes that Mitty's "concocted over-dramatizations" are based on "what he has read rather than what he has done" because, after all, Mitty has not done much in his life. As for Mitty's erroneous use of words, Lindner asserts, "While Thurber deliberately places these wrong-way signposts to reveal Mitty's ignorance of the heroic experience Mitty remains oblivious of his blunders as he succeeds in fashioning his own reality."

Undoubtedly, we all would like to fashion our own reality; we all are, to some extent, Walter Mittys. More than anything, that point of identification is the reason the story continues to appeal to readers year after year.

Source: Trudy Ring, for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Research, 1997.
Trudy Ring is a reporter, editor, and frequent writer on literary subjects.

Thurber's Walter Mitty—The Underground American Hero

James Thurber has long been recognized as one of America's leading modern humorists. His stories, sketches, and cartoons are engaging, often leading to chuckles of wry reminiscence. But when he created "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," Thurber wrought better than he knew, for he had touched upon one of the major themes in American literature—the conflict between individual and society. Mitty's forerunners are readily observable in native folklore and fiction. On one side Mitty is a descendant of Rip Van Winkle and Tom Sawyer. On the other side he dream-wishes qualities customarily exhibited by the legendary frontier hero. Yet, while Thurber's story derives from American cultural tradition, it presents the quest for identity in an unmistakably modern context. In what may be the final scene in an unfolding tapestry of heroic situations, Mitty struggles to achieve a measure of self-respect, but finds himself restricted to the pathways of retreat and wish-fulfillment.

Mitty's closest literary forerunner is Rip Van Winkle, the "good-bad boy" of American fiction. Like Rip, Mitty has a wife who embodies the authority of a society in which the husband cannot function. Mitty's world is routine, trivial, and fraught with pigeon-holes; it persecutes the individual, strips his life of romance, and dictates what his actions (if not his thoughts) should be. The husband is often reduced to the status of a naughty child (as demonstrated by a prepubertal mentality); and he attempts to escape rather than confront a world symbolized by a wife who, more often than not, seems to be a mother-figure rather than a partner. Because of the threat which the wife-mother poses to the American male psyche, Rip must go hunting, Deerslayer cannot marry and dwell in the town, and Huck seeks the river rather than be *sivilized*.

Huck's boyhood companion, Tom Sawyer, is not only one of the most popular characters in American fiction, he is one of the most successful at circumventing authority-figures. He manages to do this in the real world, thus distinguishing himself from Rip and Mitty. But if he succeeds, it may be because the pressure is not as great; after all, he is only a boy, not subject to the strain of a day-to-day relationship with its attendant responsibilities. Society does not weigh heavily upon Tom's boyish shoulders, and his pranks and practical jokes permit him to squirm free from the little discomfort he experiences. Because Tom's freedom is never seriously threatened, his rebellion (a conventional one at that) remains on an adolescent level.

What Mitty and Tom do share, however, is an imagination based on book-adventures. Like Tom, Mitty romanticizes and inflates situations, and this goes far to explain why Mitty's mind will not (indeed, can not) grapple with the world about him. Because his imagination depends upon what he has read rather than what he has done, Mitty lives a vicarious existence. And, conversely, Mitty's misuse of words and concocted over-dramatizations betoken his unwillingness to dwell in a dimension which cannot feed his imaginative faculties. Given his routine external life, how could it be otherwise? Only in Mitty's world could an eight-engine hydroplane leave the water. The banker, Wellington McMillan (note the initials), falls prey to "coreopsis" during his operation—but "coreopsis" denotes a genus of plants. Captain Mitty, the courageous flier, mistakenly refers to the "Jerries" as the "Archies." And the Webley-Vickers 50-80, with which the one-armed defendant is so proficient (along with every other "known make of gun") is probably a Smith and Wesson. A dual purpose is evident here, for while Thurber deliberately places these wrong-way signposts to reveal Mitty's ignorance of the heroic experience Mitty remains oblivious of his blunders as he succeeds in fashioning his own reality. Simultaneously it is a sad and amusing show.

Mitty's visions, however, are more than mere adolescent fantasies with their theatricality and simplistic crises; they are surprisingly true to what Lawrence in *Studies in Classic American Literature* defined as the fundamental American male psyche: "The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer."

Lawrence went on to elaborate: "A man who keeps his moral integrity hard and intact. An isolate, almost selfless, stoic, enduring man, who lives by death, by killing, but who is pure white." (Mitty's "white" heroes are always officers and gentlemen—a "pure" aristocracy indeed.) It must be noted that nearly all of Mitty's visions deal with violence, and even the one exception dramatizes a matter of life and death. This kind of situation allows the ultimate in symbolic action in which the questions of self can be answered and personal values defined. One can speculate whether Mitty's visions of crises and correspondingly heroic responses are so familiar because they are inherent in the national unconscious or because they recur with such frequency in the national literature. The speculative game is one of chicken and egg; the undeniable fact suggests serious and alarming possibilities concerning the American male mentality in a time when football and military force provide over-simplified moral and physical confrontations.

This quality of self-reliance, so directly traceable to the American past, is manifested by Mitty's dream-self to a considerable degree. In both the frontier literature and that of the New England Romantic tradition, the hero always defined himself through actions which dramatically delineated his inner self and established his identity, as Daniel Hoffman points out in *Form and Fable* in American Fiction. A youthful culture naturally produced heroes with youthful qualities, most notably an unshaken self-confidence which framed their belief that they could always adapt to the world, no matter what the world might prove to be. This kind of unqualified optimism in one's ability (one side of the Romantic coin) reveals itself most clearly in Cooper's Natty Bumppo, Emerson's "Self-Reliance" and Thoreau's exploits in *Walden*. It is this swaggering self-assertion and a conviction regarding the control of one's destiny which characterize at once the American hero and Mitty's alter ego. (One need only recall how Mitty substitutes the fountain pen for the faulty piston in the failing anaesthetizer, how he strikes the villainous District Attorney from a sitting position with his one good arm in the chivalrous defense of a Byronic heroine, and how he prepares to fly, alone and weary, on a vital mission against the "Archies.") Like Davy Crockett, Mike Fink, and Natty Bumppo, the dream-Mitty can out-shoot, out-fight, and out-do any and all opposition. But the man who can surmount catastrophes, man-made or natural, exists today only in the mind of a bewildered and hen-pecked protagonist. Whether the potential for heroic action was greater in the past, or whether there were indeed giants in those days, Mitty, like Miniver Cheevy, can only *think* about it. "The greatest pistol shot in the world" is reduced to ordering puppy-biscuit, to fetching and carrying for his wife, and he has difficulty even recalling the name of the product....

In the continuing battle with society, the individual resorts increasingly to escapism rather than to direct opposition. Rip sleeps away the time in order to avoid the wear and tear of prolonged and ineffectual confrontation. Mitty attempts a series of little sleeps, only to be awakened before each climax. Inevitably and ironically, the relentlessly real world determines both the origin and the premature conclusion of each fantasy. With the repeated stifling of each psychological orgasm, Mitty's predicament becomes more frustrated and with increasing desperation he returns to his dream-world to seek release. His triumphs, projected upon an internal terrain, are the more tantalizing because they are so fleeting and so abruptly terminated. There is no satisfaction at having beaten the system, for even his inward retreat provides no real haven.

What becomes more evident as the story progresses is the vision of the contemporary world as Hell for the Romantic individual. Mitty is recalled from his first vision when this word tolls, and the word is immediately followed by his wife's voice, admonishing him not to drive so fast. The dreamer is repeatedly forced to return to a world he neither desires nor understands. It is a world peopled with a host of authority-figures who plague the beleaguered Mitty like demons—doctors, bankers, district attorneys, mechanics, parking-lot attendants, and policemen—all of whom sound very much like Mrs. Mitty. (Notice how Mitty mistakes the voice and tone of the policeman for his wife's orders to keep his gloves on.) Mitty is the man who is constantly forced to backtrack by wife and/or society. Even a lowly parking-lot attendant assumes authority over him, telling him to "Back it up, Mac!" Mitty's spiritual and physical location are linked when the attendant informs him "Wrong lane, Mac." Our hero remembers how "once he had tried to take his chains off" but was forced to ask a grinning mechanic for help. And so, significantly, it is "an old copy of *Liberty*" that he peruses while

awaiting his wife's return. When she rebukes him for hiding, Mitty can only resignedly muse to himself, "Things close in."

These three words circumscribe much of the contemporary American male's feelings toward adult responsibilities. Small wonder that he returns to boyhood methods of dealing with a world which confuses him—and small wonder that he conceives his wife as threat and stifler of his inner self....

The heroic mold has generally been cast by a juvenile imagination in America. Certainly the folk heroes were inflated to larger-than-life proportions. And the Romantic imagination would naturally have seized upon the frontier as a natural landscape whereon heroic deeds of a corresponding size and nature could be performed. But in Thurber's modern man only a dim memory of a heroic past remains, nurtured on puerile fantasies propagated by films and pulp fiction. With the frontier gone, and space and privacy at a premium, there is only one place where Mitty can hope to fulfill himself—in a world of self-projection. And even here he cannot totally escape, for the real world apprizes him of its presence by shattering each delusion before it can be climaxed.

As a result of being perpetually interrupted at crucial moments in these fantasies, it seems only proper that Mitty's final role should be that of the condemned man about to be executed by a faceless firing squad for reasons not explicitly given. This vision is a marvelously telling projection of Mitty's place in the world as he feels it. How fitting it is that the story ends, as it began, with a daydream and that, to the external world (his wife, among others), Walter Mitty wears that "faint, fleeting smile" and remains "inscrutable to the last."

Source: Carl M. Lindner, "Thurber's Walter Mitty—The Underground American Hero," in *The Georgia Review*, Vol. XXVIII, No 2, Summer, 1974 pp. 283-89.

The Architecture of Walter Mitty's Secret Life

Any unit of literature which attempts to deal with the appreciation of the short story, either for pleasure or for the recognition of the principles involved in creative writing, would do well to include in its table of contents Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty." Long recognized for its entertainment value, Thurber's most popular short story is rarely subjected to the careful scrutiny so deserving of a perfect architectural design.

As is the case with so much literary criticism, my own notes on "The Secret Life" are not so much a result of private musings as the fruit of a dialogue involving students and myself engaged in observing, through sample pieces, the structural elements of this genre. I read "The Secret Life" to a group of highly sensitive and alert young people. The subsequent discussion was more rewarding than I had anticipated.

We began by referring to the five major types of conflict recurrently treated in fiction.

Man vs. Man

Man vs. Society

Man vs. Self

Man vs. Nature

Man vs. God (or Conscience)

It soon became evident to us that Thurber's story is highly charged with the various types of conflict

The Man vs. Man conflict is illustrated in Mitty's several encounters with the walk-on characters who remind him of his alienation from the real world. During their drive to the beauty parlor, Walter's nagging wife jolts him out of his first fantasy with her chattering censure of his heavy accelerator foot. She then commands him

to purchase a pair of rubbers (there is snow on the ground) and several other items. Minutes later, Mrs. Mitty discharged at her destination, Walter stops for a red light, lingers when it turns green, and receives the snappy order of a policeman to "Pick it up, brother!" He drives around for a while, is engulfed in the second dream, and emerges from it at the sharp rebuke of a parking lot attendant. "Back it up, Mack. Look out for that Buick." Our hero has just entered the lot on a lane marked "Exit Only."

This embarrassment reminds Walter of a similar one. He recalls, with much chagrin, the occasion on which he attempted to remove the chains from his tires and only succeeded in tangling them in the axle. He'd had to send for the "grinning young garageman" to unwind them. He resolves, the next time, to "wear my right arm in a sling and they'll see I couldn't possibly take the chains off myself." This incident reveals in Walter a low level of mechanical coordination, a fact important to remember later in the discussion.

Walter forgets an item on his wife's shopping list. On the heels of his third fantasy, he remembers and mutters out loud "Puppy biscuit." A passing woman ridicules him by exclaiming to her companion: "Puppy biscuit. That man said 'Puppy biscuit' to himself." Walter's fifth and final Man vs. Man conflict occurs when, sitting in a chair in a hotel lobby, Mrs. Mitty shocks him out of his fourth reverie by chiding him for awaiting her arrival in an obscure part of the lobby.

The Man vs. Nature conflict is exemplified in two of the dream sequences. In the first dream Walter, now the heroic Commander of a Navy hydroplane, pulls his crew through a raging hurricane. In the second dream he is a distinguished surgeon requested to assist in an operation on a dying millionaire. During the operation the new anesthetizer gives way. Walter's quick thinking saves the day when he replaces a faulty piston with a fountain pen, calculates the substitute as worth ten minutes, and successfully completes the operation himself. Here the two aspects of nature against which Mitty is struggling are Time and Death.

The Man vs. Society conflict also appears in two dreams. In the third dream Mitty is being examined on the witness stand by the District Attorney. He is cleared of suspicion in a murder charge by virtue of having his right arm in a sling. Gallant protector of womankind that he is, Walter sacrifices himself for the real female culprit by insisting that he could have shot Gregory Fitzhurst at 300 feet with his left hand! Here Mitty consciously pits himself against the state (Society) manifests his resentment against the real world (of individuals who daily browbeat him) by socking the District Attorney on the jaw.

Again, in the last dream, Mitty stands before a firing squad (the explosive pressure of society against him for being the kind of dreamer that he is), refuses the blindfold, carelessly lights a last cigarette, and calmly awaits his vengeful martyrdom.

The Man vs. Self conflict is more implicitly than explicitly stated in the thread of the story. Walter Mitty is a man who has come to recognize himself as somewhat of a nobody. No man likes that kind of recognition. Some men accept it and make a healthy adjustment to the fact. Walter refuses this course and takes refuge in a private world in which all external reality is a periphery and he is its unchallenged center. He does not like what he is, his selfhood, and so he chooses to become, in his mind, the various heroic personalities that he can never be in reality.

My students and I could not find any definite occasion for the Man vs. God (Conscience) conflict in "The Secret Life." I find it remarkable, however, that Thurber could have packed so much of the other four types into five pages. Possibly this explains, in large measure, the success of the story.

I used Stephen Minot's *Three Genres* as source material for teaching the structural elements of the short story. Minot explains two types of characterization, the vertical and horizontal. When a writer draws his characters vertically, they undergo some kind of upward or downward movement; in other words, they develop upward, reach some kind of awakening or epiphany, and consequently improve in character, or else move downward

and are degraded. Horizontal characterization, however, moves the character scene by scene through the story without any basic alteration in personality, attitude, or value; that is, the character remains on the same plane throughout the story. (Clifton Fadiman would call this incidental characterization.) Vertical characterization is usually restricted to main characters (for cathartic purposes, I suppose) and horizontal characterization to minor figures.

What struck me as peculiar about Thurber's story, and I was able to elicit the same response from my students, was the unique manner in which "The Secret Life," centering exclusively on one main character, manages to fuse both vertical and horizontal development in that character. Walter Mitty does not undergo any basic change in personality throughout the story. "The Secret Life" begins with him dreaming and ends with him dreaming. He is, in fact, a chronic daydreamer, and he never awakens to the mental disease which afflicts him. His wife suggests that he see a psychiatrist, but he will not recognize the need. He will probably continue driving recklessly and being a menace to those about him for the rest of his life. One might conclude, then, that that character is developed horizontally, an apparent violation of protagonist delineation. However, Thurber has brilliantly contrived a visible (if artificial) sense of vertical characterization through the elevation of the real Walter Mitty to his five heroic dream figures. Thurber uses the see-saw device. The five dreams are interrupted by five brief periods of lucidity (or vice versa, if you prefer). Five times Walter experiences (and by identification so does the reader) the radical transformation from dull, bumbling, uncoordinated simpleton to sparkling genius, pompous adventurer, and dauntless martyr. Witness the fusion, or confusion, of vertical and horizontal characterization.

Insofar as every man daydreams, though not to Mitty's extent, Thurber arouses the sympathetic concern of the reader for his protagonist's cause. But exactly what is Walter Mitty's cause? The young reader tends to ignore the more profound vision of Thurber's story and concentrates rather on the high dramatic tension of the dream narratives and the comic relief of Walter's embarrassing confrontations with reality. The young reader identifies with Walter as he does with Holden Caulfield. The reason is plain; Walter, like most adolescents, is a chronic daydreamer, just as Holden provides for every adolescent the catharsis of a series of crises typical of young people. But the adult reader easily perceives the neurotic character of Holden's odyssey. Indeed, his narrative is written from the hospital room where he is recovering from a mental breakdown. Walter Mitty is headed for one.

I suggested to my students the gradual mental disintegration of Mitty. Their initial reaction, of course, was hostile. They liked Walter Mitty and sided with him against his opponents, both real and imaginary. I approached the difficulty by examining the expository information supplied about Walter's past. Of particular importance is the citation of his inability to remove the chains from his tires without tangling them in the axle. All of the boys in my class admitted that this was a test of simple muscular and mechanical coordination and that Walter failed it. I asked them why he had failed it. Only one knew. He reasoned that Walter probably had not had much training as a boy in simple mechanical tasks. The same boy, after a little prodding, was able to see the consequence of this lack. Walter, upon reaching manhood, had not the equipment for mechanical coordination possessed by most men. If a man cannot reach the real world through his hands, in what direction does his Gestalt usually move? His center of activity would become mental, I think, rather than physical. Chesterton could not successfully tie a string around a box. He compensated for this physical deficiency by projecting his active center onto the world of literary imagination. The difference between Chesterton and Mitty is that the former channeled his imagination outward upon the world and turned it topsyturvy with his artist's wand, while the latter focused his imagination inward upon himself and is about to reform the world therein, according to his own egocentric fancy.

Walter obviously has an antipathy for the real world. Society seems to reject him, not as a despicable outcast, but in curt little ways which, piled one on another in the daily struggle, have reached crystallization in Walter's mind as veritable slings and arrows of external reality. He flees from the imagined enemy by entering his dream world every few minutes. There the situation is reversed. There he is the man who can do anything

and does everything. But Walter's flights of fancy have reached the danger point. Notice his disregard for the real world during his dreams. He ignores the safe speed limit, the red light turned green, and unknowingly enters a lane marked "Exit Only." Notice, too, that he purchases his rubbers but instead of putting them on before leaving the store he has them wrapped in a box, apparently oblivious to the elements outside.

Thurber accentuates Walter's confusion of his public and secret life by making him borrow objects from the real world and use them as props in his dreams. The resolution to wear his arm in a sling next time he brings his car to the garage for removal of tire chains is carried into the courtroom scene where he is exonerated for complicity in a homicide because of his injured arm. Again, waiting for his wife in the hotel lobby, Mitty scans newspaper photos of German bombed cities; in the following dream he is Captain Mitty, ace pilot of World War II fame.

Young people read "The Secret Life" and revel in its adventurous exploits and comic irony. Thurber certainly meant that kind of an appreciation. But I think it was to his credit, as it was to Salinger's, that beneath the narrative there runs the thread of a tragic envelopment which is touchingly pathetic. We do not know for sure, but it is not hard to suspect that one day the public and secret life of Walter Mitty will merge and for him become indistinguishable. The charm of his personality is that he has not learned to face reality (and we delight in escaping reality with him). He is wrapped in child-like subjectivity. But the tragedy of the man is that he will almost surely grow down and be locked, maybe once and for all, in the dark, secret, and lower depths.

Source: Carl Sundell, "The Architecture of Walter Mitty's Secret Life," in *English Journal*, Vol. 56, No 9, December, 1967, pp. 1284-87

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty: Compare and Contrast

1930s: *The New Yorker* magazine typifies East Coast intellectualism and many popular writers of the day publish stories and articles in it that exemplify an urban sense of sophistication and humor.

1997: Under the editorship of the controversial Tina Brown, *The New Yorker* struggles to maintain its reputation, yet circulation is up over recent years to 860,000.

1939: The theme of the 1939-40 New York World's Fair is "The World of Tomorrow," which highlights Americans' belief in emerging science and technology as a cure-all.

Today: *Forbes* magazine reports that in 1994 orthopedic surgeons pay annual malpractice premiums ranging from \$33,000 to \$117,000. The large number of medical malpractice suits in U.S. courts points to a growing cynicism Americans feel towards medicine and technology.

1940s: During World War II, many women enter jobs vacated by men who have joined the war effort.

Today: Although efforts to pass an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution failed in 1982, women such as Katharine Graham, publisher and CEO of the *Washington Post*, demonstrate women's increasing roles in political, social and cultural arenas.

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty: Topics for Further Study

Consider stereotypes of masculinity in society today. How are these stereotypes enacted in Walter Mitty's dreams? How do these stereotypes differ from his everyday behavior?

Do you think Thurber's characterization of Mrs. Mitty is sexist? What sort of picture of marriage emerges in the story, and how does that picture compare with what is considered a "typical" marriage in American society today?

List the details which connect Walter's fantasies and his reality together. Analyze the significance of these details to the story's overall theme.

Investigate American society during the end of the depression and the beginning of World War II. Do you think Thurber accurately portrays middle-class life during that time in "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"? Why or why not?

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty: Media Adaptations

In 1947, Samuel Goldwyn Studios produced a well-regarded movie-length version of Thurber's story, titled *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*. The movie stars Danny Kaye and Virginia Mayo and is available through RKO distributors and on video.

Radio Yesteryear Audio released a book-on-tape titled *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty: And You Could Look It Up*, in August, 1988.

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty: What Do I Read Next?

James Thurber's 1933 *My Life and Hard Times* is a semi-fictional autobiography full of comically exaggerated incidents from his life.

T. S. Eliot's 1917 modernist poem, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, explores the emptiness of modern life through its depiction of Alfred Prufrock, who struggles with the nature of his existence. Critic Peter DeVries referred to James Thurber as a "comic Prufrock," noting Thurber's ability to capture human weaknesses, and to balance tragedy and comedy in his work, all elements found in the *Prufrock* poem

Mark Twain's 1885 novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, is a classic of American humor. The novel about a young boy who chooses to escape his home rather than be "civilized" is Twain's most popular work.

John Updike's *Rabbit, Run*, published in 1960, is the story of blue-collar Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, who runs away from adult relationships.

David Riesman's sociological study of the modern condition and the American individual, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*, provides historical and social insights into the problems of twentieth-century life.

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty: Bibliography and Further Reading

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Elias, Robert H. "James Thurber: The Primitive, the Innocent, and the Individual," in *Thurber: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Charles S. Holmes, Prentice-Hall, 1974, pp. 87-100

Elias explores how Thurber's heroes, including Walter Mitty, preserve their individuality in a hostile world.

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty: Pictures

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