

the secret life of walter mitty by james thurber

the secret life of walter mitty by james thurber is a renowned short story that has captivated readers since its publication in 1939. This literary work explores themes of escapism, imagination, and the contrast between mundane reality and vivid fantasy. James Thurber, a celebrated American author and cartoonist, created a memorable character in Walter Mitty, whose daydreams provide a fascinating insight into human nature and the desire for adventure. The story's distinctive narrative style and rich symbolism invite analysis from both literary and psychological perspectives. This article delves into the background, plot, themes, and cultural impact of the secret life of walter mitty by james thurber, offering a comprehensive understanding of its enduring popularity. The following sections present an organized overview of key aspects of this classic story.

- Background and Publication History
- Plot Summary of the Secret Life of Walter Mitty
- Character Analysis: Walter Mitty
- Themes and Symbolism
- Literary Style and Narrative Techniques
- Adaptations and Cultural Impact

Background and Publication History

The secret life of walter mitty by james thurber first appeared in The New Yorker magazine in 1939. Thurber, known for his wit and humor, drew on his own experiences and the cultural climate of the time to craft this concise yet impactful story. The narrative reflects the interwar period's social dynamics in America, capturing the tensions between conformity and individualism. Thurber's reputation as a leading figure in American humor helped the story gain immediate attention. Over the decades, it has been included in numerous anthologies and studied extensively in academic settings due to its blend of humor, irony, and psychological depth.

Plot Summary of the Secret Life of Walter Mitty

The story centers on Walter Mitty, a mild-mannered, unassuming man who frequently escapes his ordinary life through a series of vivid daydreams. These fantasies portray Mitty as a heroic and adventurous figure, contrasting starkly with his real-life persona. Throughout the story, Mitty slips into different imagined roles, including a daring pilot, a skilled surgeon, and a fearless soldier, each scenario reflecting his subconscious desires and frustrations. Meanwhile, in reality, Mitty appears passive and somewhat henpecked, navigating mundane errands and interactions. The juxtaposition between reality and fantasy is a core element of the narrative, highlighting the character's inner conflict and longing for significance.

Character Analysis: Walter Mitty

Walter Mitty is a complex character whose inner life contrasts dramatically with his external behavior. He is portrayed as timid and ineffectual in his daily existence but possesses a rich imagination that allows him to assume powerful identities. This duality is central to understanding the character's psychology and the story's message. Through Mitty's daydreams, readers gain insight into his aspirations, fears, and dissatisfaction with his social role. His fantasies often depict him as competent, admired, and heroic, suggesting a deep yearning for control and recognition. The character's interactions with his wife and the world around him further emphasize his meekness and social invisibility.

Psychological Dimensions

The secret life of walter mitty by james thurber explores the psychological concept of escapism and the use of fantasy as a coping mechanism. Mitty's daydreams serve as a refuge from the constraints and disappointments of his reality. This behavior aligns with theories of imagination as a means to fulfill unmet desires and manage stress. The story subtly critiques the limitations imposed by society on individuals like Mitty, who find solace only in their mental escapes.

Supporting Characters

While Walter Mitty is the focal point, the supporting characters, particularly his wife, play a crucial role in framing his experiences. His wife's domineering and sometimes dismissive attitude underscores Mitty's subdued nature and lack of assertiveness. Other minor characters, such as the parking attendant and the shop clerk, contribute to the depiction of Mitty's ordinary world, reinforcing the contrast with his extraordinary fantasies.

Themes and Symbolism

The story is rich in themes that resonate with readers across generations. Central among these is the theme of escapism, as Walter Mitty retreats into fantasy to avoid the banality and frustrations of his life. The narrative also addresses themes of identity, freedom, and the human desire for significance. Symbolism is evident in the recurring motifs of adventure and danger within Mitty's daydreams, symbolizing his internal struggle for empowerment.

Escapism and Reality

Escapism is portrayed as both a coping strategy and a source of conflict. Walter Mitty's vivid fantasies provide temporary relief but also emphasize his dissatisfaction with reality. The tension between dream and actuality invites reflection on the role of imagination in human experience and the psychological need to balance both realms.

Heroism and Power

Mitty's imagined roles as a pilot, surgeon, and soldier symbolize his yearning for respect, competence, and control. These heroic personas contrast with his powerless real-life identity, illustrating the disparity between inner desires and external circumstances. The story suggests that heroism may be as much a psychological construct as a societal role.

Symbolic Elements

- **The Flying Plane:** Represents freedom and escape from mundane life.
- **The Operating Room:** Symbolizes control and skill.
- **The Courtroom and Military Settings:** Reflect authority and courage.

Literary Style and Narrative Techniques

James Thurber's writing style in *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* is characterized by concise prose, wit, and a distinctive narrative structure. The story employs a seamless movement between reality and fantasy, creating a layered reading experience. Thurber's use of irony and humor enhances the story's thematic depth, while his economical language ensures clarity and engagement. The juxtaposition of ordinary and extraordinary scenes serves to highlight the protagonist's inner life without disrupting the narrative flow.

Narrative Structure

The story's structure alternates between brief moments in Walter Mitty's real life and his elaborate daydreams. This technique allows readers to experience the contrast firsthand, emphasizing the character's psychological state. The transitions between reality and fantasy are subtle yet effective, often triggered by mundane events that spark Mitty's imagination.

Use of Humor and Irony

Thurber's humor in *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* by James Thurber is gentle and reflective rather than overtly comedic. Irony arises from the discrepancy between Mitty's grandiose fantasies and his meek real-life persona. This ironic tone encourages readers to empathize with Mitty while recognizing the universal human tendency to dream beyond one's circumstances.

Adaptations and Cultural Impact

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty by James Thurber has inspired various adaptations and has had a lasting cultural impact. Its themes of imagination and escapism resonate broadly, making it a popular source for film, theater, and other media. The story has influenced the portrayal of daydreaming characters in literature and popular culture, highlighting its significance beyond its original publication.

Film Adaptations

Several film adaptations have brought the story to a wider audience, each interpreting the narrative and characters in unique ways. The most notable adaptation is the 2013 film, which expanded the story into a full-length feature, incorporating new elements while maintaining the core themes. These adaptations illustrate the story's flexibility and enduring appeal.

Influence on Popular Culture

Walter Mitty has become synonymous with the archetype of the dreamer who escapes reality through imagination. The story's influence extends to idiomatic expressions, literary references, and character archetypes in various media. Its exploration of human psychology and creativity continues to inspire writers, filmmakers, and scholars alike.

Legacy in Literature

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty by James Thurber remains a staple in American

literature courses and anthologies. Its concise yet profound examination of fantasy versus reality has made it a subject of literary criticism and academic study. Thurber's work exemplifies the power of short fiction to capture complex human experiences in a brief format.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty' by James Thurber?

The main theme is the contrast between mundane reality and vivid fantasy, highlighting Walter Mitty's escapism from his ordinary life through daydreams.

Who is Walter Mitty in James Thurber's story?

Walter Mitty is the protagonist, an ordinary man who frequently escapes his dull daily life by imagining himself as a heroic and adventurous character in various fantasies.

How does James Thurber use humor in 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty'?

Thurber uses humor through the absurdity and exaggeration of Walter Mitty's daydreams, as well as the contrast between his meek real-life character and his bold imagined personas.

What role do Walter Mitty's daydreams play in the story?

Walter Mitty's daydreams serve as a coping mechanism that allows him to escape the monotony and lack of control he experiences in his real life, providing excitement and a sense of importance.

How does the story reflect societal attitudes towards masculinity?

The story reflects societal expectations of masculinity by portraying Walter Mitty's fantasies as heroic and traditionally masculine roles, contrasting with his passive and submissive behavior in reality.

What is the significance of the setting in 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty'?

The setting, primarily mundane and ordinary locations, emphasizes the stark

contrast between Walter Mitty's dull real life and his extraordinary fantasies.

How does Thurber's writing style contribute to the story's impact?

Thurber's concise and witty writing style, combined with sudden shifts between reality and fantasy, effectively highlights the humor and poignancy of Walter Mitty's dual existence.

Why has 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty' remained popular over time?

The story remains popular because it resonates with readers' own desires to escape everyday life, and its themes of imagination and self-identity are timeless and universally relatable.

Additional Resources

1. The Secret Life of Walter Mitty by James Thurber

This is the original short story that introduced readers to Walter Mitty, a mild-mannered man who escapes his mundane life through vivid daydreams where he imagines himself as a hero in various exciting scenarios. The story humorously contrasts Mitty's dull reality with his grandiose fantasies, exploring themes of escapism and the human desire for adventure.

2. Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak

Though a children's picture book, this story similarly explores the theme of escapism through imagination. Max, the protagonist, retreats into a wild fantasy world where he becomes king of the wild things, reflecting a child's way of coping with emotions and finding empowerment through daydreams.

3. Harold and the Purple Crayon by Crockett Johnson

This classic children's book features Harold, a young boy who creates his own imaginative world with a purple crayon. Like Walter Mitty, Harold uses his imagination to navigate and transform his reality, highlighting the power and creativity of daydreaming.

4. The Catcher in the Rye by J.D. Salinger

Holden Caulfield, the protagonist, often retreats into his thoughts and fantasies as a way to deal with the complexities of growing up. The novel explores themes of alienation, identity, and the contrast between reality and idealized visions, echoing the internal struggles seen in Walter Mitty.

5. Life of Pi by Yann Martel

This novel tells the story of Pi, a young boy stranded on a lifeboat in the Pacific Ocean, who uses storytelling and imagination as survival mechanisms. The book delves into the power of imagination to transform harsh realities

into meaningful experiences, resonating with the escapist themes in Walter Mitty.

6. *Big Fish: A Novel of Mythic Proportions* by Daniel Wallace

This novel revolves around the tall tales and fantastical stories told by a father to his son, blurring the lines between reality and myth. It explores how storytelling and imagination shape our understanding of life, much like Walter Mitty's daydreams shape his perception of himself.

7. *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut

The protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, becomes "unstuck in time" and experiences moments of his life out of sequence, including fantastical elements like alien abduction. The novel combines dark humor and science fiction to explore escapism from the trauma of war, paralleling Walter Mitty's mental retreats.

8. *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho

This philosophical novel follows Santiago, a shepherd boy, on a journey to fulfill his personal legend. It emphasizes the pursuit of dreams and the transformative power of believing in one's own story, themes that align with Walter Mitty's longing for adventure and significance.

9. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon

The story is told from the perspective of Christopher, a boy with autism who perceives the world differently. His unique way of thinking and his occasional retreats into his own mental world reflect themes of escapism and alternative reality, akin to Walter Mitty's imaginative daydreams.

[The Secret Life Of Walter Mitty By James Thurber](#)

The Secret Life Of Walter Mitty By James Thurber

Related Articles

- [the road to civil rights icivics](#)
- [the spanish american war worksheet](#)
- [the origin of species the making of a theory student handout answers](#)

[Back to Home](#)