

secret life of walter mitty by james thurber

secret life of walter mitty by james thurber is a seminal short story that has captivated readers since its publication in 1939. This literary work explores the imaginative escapades of Walter Mitty, a mild-mannered man who frequently retreats into vivid daydreams to escape his mundane reality. James Thurber, renowned for his wit and insightful portrayal of human nature, crafts a narrative that balances humor and poignancy, inviting readers to reflect on themes of escapism, identity, and the contrast between fantasy and everyday life. The story's enduring appeal lies in its relatable protagonist and Thurber's masterful use of language and structure. This article delves deeply into the background, plot, characters, themes, and cultural impact of the secret life of walter mitty by james thurber, providing a comprehensive overview for scholars, students, and enthusiasts alike.

- Background and Publication History
- Plot Summary and Structure
- Main Characters and Their Roles
- Themes and Symbolism
- Literary Style and Techniques
- Cultural Impact and Adaptations

Background and Publication History

The secret life of walter mitty by james thurber was first published in The New Yorker magazine on March 18, 1939. Thurber, an influential American writer and cartoonist, created this story during a prolific period in his career. The narrative was inspired by Thurber's observations of everyday people and his own experiences with escapism and imagination. The story quickly gained popularity for its unique blend of humor and psychological insight. Over time, it has become a classic example of early 20th-century American short fiction. The background of the story reflects the socio-cultural context of the late 1930s, an era marked by the Great Depression and the looming onset of World War II, which influenced its themes and reception.

James Thurber's Literary Career

James Thurber was a prominent figure in American literature and humor, known primarily for his contributions to The New Yorker. His work often combined sharp wit with an empathetic look at human vulnerabilities. The secret life of walter mitty by james thurber fits within his broader oeuvre, which includes numerous essays, short stories, and cartoons. Thurber's background as a cartoonist also influenced his storytelling style, allowing him to blend visual imagination with textual narrative effectively.

Context of the 1930s America

The 1930s was a decade of economic hardship and social change in America. The secret life of walter mitty by james thurber reflects this context by portraying a protagonist who seeks refuge from a monotonous and stressful life through fantasy. The story captures the spirit of escapism prevalent among many Americans during this turbulent period, making its themes particularly resonant.

Plot Summary and Structure

The secret life of walter mitty by james thurber follows the day in the life of Walter Mitty, an unassuming man who indulges in a series of elaborate daydreams. These fantasies contrast starkly with his real-world experiences, which are characterized by passivity and subservience. The story's structure alternates between Mitty's mundane reality and his vivid, heroic imaginations, creating a dynamic narrative rhythm that highlights the disparity between the two worlds.

Overview of the Plot

The story begins with Walter Mitty accompanying his wife on a shopping trip. As they move through various errands, Mitty slips into multiple daydreams where he assumes roles such as a daring pilot, a skilled surgeon, a fearless assassin, and a commanding navy captain. Each fantasy is interrupted by his wife or an external event, pulling him back to his ordinary existence. The story ends ambiguously, leaving readers to ponder Mitty's inner life versus his external reality.

Narrative Techniques and Flow

Thurber employs a seamless transition technique between reality and fantasy, using minimal cues to shift the narrative perspective. This approach engages readers in Mitty's mental escapades while maintaining a grounded sense of his everyday life. The story's brevity and episodic structure contribute to its effectiveness, allowing for quick shifts in tone and setting that mirror the protagonist's restless imagination.

Main Characters and Their Roles

The secret life of walter mitty by james thurber centers primarily on its titular character, Walter Mitty, supported by a few secondary characters who serve to contrast and anchor his fantasies. Understanding these characters is crucial to appreciating the story's thematic depth and psychological complexity.

Walter Mitty

Walter Mitty is portrayed as a meek, middle-aged man who feels overshadowed and constrained in his daily life. His elaborate daydreams reveal desires for bravery, competence, and respect that he does not realize in reality. Mitty's character embodies the universal human impulse to escape disappointment and insignificance through imagination.

Mrs. Mitty

Mrs. Mitty, Walter's wife, plays a pivotal role as a grounding force in the story. She is often depicted as domineering and dismissive, unintentionally highlighting Walter's meekness and dissatisfaction. Her interruptions serve to pull Walter back from his fantasies, symbolizing the constraints of social and marital expectations.

Supporting Characters

The story includes minor characters such as a parking attendant, a hospital nurse, and a shop clerk. These figures represent the mundane reality surrounding Walter and often act as catalysts for his daydreams or interruptions thereof.

Themes and Symbolism

The secret life of walter mitty by james thurber explores several profound themes that resonate with readers across generations. These themes include escapism, the dichotomy between fantasy and reality, identity, and the search for meaning in ordinary life. The story's symbolism enriches its narrative and invites multiple interpretations.

Escapism and Imagination

One of the central themes is escapism, as Walter Mitty uses imagination to transcend his unsatisfactory existence. His daydreams offer a psychological refuge, allowing him to experience excitement, power, and control absent from his real life. This theme reflects broader human tendencies to seek relief from stress and monotony through fantasy.

Reality versus Fantasy

The story juxtaposes Walter's dull reality with his thrilling fantasies, illustrating the tension between the two. This contrast serves as a commentary on the limitations of everyday life and the human desire for heroism and significance. The interruptions that pull Walter back to reality underscore the persistent dominance of the real world over imagination.

Identity and Self-Perception

Walter Mitty's daydreams reveal his idealized self-image, which contrasts sharply with how others perceive him. This discrepancy highlights issues of identity and self-worth, suggesting that personal fulfillment often requires reconciling inner desires with external circumstances.

Symbolism in the Story

- **The Car:** Represents Walter's journey between reality and fantasy.
- **Daydreams:** Symbolize freedom and empowerment.
- **Mrs. Mitty's Commands:** Embody societal pressures and control.
- **The Navy Commander Persona:** Reflects authority and respect sought by Walter.

Literary Style and Techniques

The secret life of walter mitty by james thurber showcases distinctive literary techniques that contribute to its lasting impact. Thurber's style is characterized by concise prose, sharp dialogue, and a seamless blend of humor and pathos. These elements work together to create a vivid portrayal of Walter Mitty's inner and outer worlds.

Use of Humor and Irony

Thurber employs humor subtly through the absurdity of Walter's daydreams and the contrast with his real-life ineptitude. Irony permeates the story, especially in how the grandiose fantasies are undercut by mundane interruptions. This use of humor serves to both entertain and provoke reflection on human nature.

Symbolic Language and Imagery

The story uses symbolic language to deepen meaning, with imagery that vividly contrasts the dullness of Walter's reality against the richness of his imagination. Descriptions in the daydream sequences are dramatic and adventurous, emphasizing their allure.

Dialogue and Characterization

Dialogue in the story is minimal but effective, particularly in interactions between Walter and his wife. These exchanges reveal character dynamics and reinforce themes of control and submission.

Cultural Impact and Adaptations

The secret life of walter mitty by james thurber has had a significant cultural impact since its publication. It has inspired various adaptations across different media, reflecting its universal themes and enduring popularity. The story continues to influence literature, film, and popular culture.

Film Adaptations

One of the most notable adaptations is the 1947 film starring Danny Kaye, which expanded the story into a full-length musical comedy. More recently, the 2013 film directed by and starring Ben Stiller reimagined the story with a modern sensibility, focusing more on personal growth and adventure. These adaptations highlight the story's flexibility and relevance to different audiences.

Influence on Popular Culture

The secret life of walter mitty by james thurber has become synonymous with daydreaming and escapism in popular culture. The term "Walter Mitty" is often used to describe someone who indulges in fanciful fantasies disconnected from reality. This cultural penetration attests to the story's powerful depiction of imagination as a coping mechanism.

Literary Legacy

As a staple of American literature, the story is frequently studied in academic settings for its thematic depth and stylistic innovation. It has influenced numerous writers and remains a touchstone for exploring the intersection of fantasy and reality in storytelling.

Frequently Asked Questions

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

The main theme of 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty' is the contrast between fantasy and reality, showcasing how Walter Mitty escapes his mundane life through vivid daydreams.

Who is Walter Mitty in James Thurber's story?

Walter Mitty is the protagonist of the story, a meek and ordinary man who frequently escapes into heroic and adventurous daydreams to cope with his dull daily life.

When was 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty' first published?

The story was first published in The New Yorker magazine on March 18, 1939.

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

Thurber uses humor through the exaggerated and absurd nature of Walter Mitty's daydreams, as well as the contrast between Mitty's fantasies and his real-life interactions.

What literary techniques are prominent in 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty'?

Prominent literary techniques include stream of consciousness, irony, satire, and vivid imagery to depict Walter Mitty's imaginative daydreams.

How do Walter Mitty's daydreams reflect his personality?

Walter Mitty's daydreams reveal his desire for bravery, control, and significance, traits he feels are lacking in his real life.

What role does the setting play in 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty'?

The mundane and routine settings of Walter Mitty's real life serve as a stark contrast to his exciting and heroic daydreams, emphasizing his need for escape.

Has 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty' been adapted into other media?

Yes, the story has been adapted into films, most notably the 1947 film starring Danny Kaye and the 2013 film starring Ben Stiller.

What is the significance of the story's ending in 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty'?

The ending leaves readers contemplating the balance between fantasy and reality, and whether Walter Mitty's daydreams provide meaningful escape or highlight his dissatisfaction with life.

Additional Resources

1. *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* by James Thurber

This classic short story follows Walter Mitty, a mild-mannered man who frequently escapes his mundane life through vivid daydreams where he imagines himself as a heroic and adventurous figure. The narrative explores themes of escapism, courage, and the contrast between fantasy and reality. Thurber's witty and poignant storytelling has made this tale a timeless piece of American literature.

2. *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak

Though a children's picture book, this story shares the theme of escapism through imagination. It tells of Max, a boy who travels to a fantastical island inhabited by wild creatures. Like Mitty, Max's adventures represent a vivid inner world that contrasts with his everyday reality, highlighting the power of imagination.

3. *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel

This novel explores survival and the power of storytelling as Pi Patel recounts his incredible journey stranded on a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger. The story blurs the lines between reality and imagination, much like Walter Mitty's daydreams, and delves into themes of belief, identity, and resilience.

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

Holden Caulfield, the protagonist, navigates a world he finds phony and disappointing by retreating into his own thoughts and fantasies. Similar to Walter Mitty, Holden's internal life is rich and complex, serving as a refuge from his struggles with growing up and societal expectations.

5. *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes

This classic novel features Don Quixote, a man who imagines himself a chivalrous knight embarking on noble quests. Like Walter Mitty, Quixote's fantasies clash with reality, leading to humorous and poignant moments that explore idealism, illusion, and the human desire for meaning.

6. *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* by F. Scott Fitzgerald

Fitzgerald's story about a man who ages backward touches on themes of identity and the fluidity of time. While not directly about daydreaming, Benjamin Button's unique life challenges conventional reality, much like Walter Mitty's escapism challenges his mundane existence.

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

This novel tells the story of a man whose life is filled with extraordinary tales and tall stories. The blending of myth and reality resonates with the secret life of Walter Mitty, emphasizing storytelling as a means to cope with life's challenges and to create a more vibrant existence.

8. *Neverwhere* by Neil Gaiman

In this urban fantasy, an ordinary man discovers a hidden, fantastical world beneath London. The protagonist's journey mirrors Walter Mitty's escape into a different reality, exploring themes of transformation, adventure, and the hidden depths beneath everyday life.

9. *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut

This novel's protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, becomes "unstuck in time" and experiences moments of his life out of order, blending reality with science fiction elements. Like Walter Mitty's daydreams, the narrative challenges conventional perceptions of reality and explores the human mind's way of coping with trauma and absurdity.

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