

THEMES IN THE STORY

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.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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."

UNIVERSAL APPEAL OF WALTER MITTY

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.

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 cliches 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 cliched 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.

universal appeal

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

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.

MAIN FORMS OF CONFLICT FOUND IN FICTION

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

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.

Humor
Conflict

MODERN MAN AS REPRESENTED IN THE STORY

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."

Modern
man

MRS. MITTY'S CHARACTER

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."

Mrs. Mitty

Mrs. Mitty