GENERAL

secret life of walter mitty by james thurber

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Introduction

When most people think of classic American humor, the name **James Thurber** surfaces immediately. His wit, his keen observation of human foibles, and his unique blend of illustration and prose have left an indelible mark on the literary landscape. Among his most celebrated works is the short story that has become a cultural touchstone: *Secret Life of Walter Mitty*. Often simply called "Walter Mitty," this narrative offers a humorous yet poignant exploration of imagination, escape, and the human yearning for adventure. In this article we delve deeply into the story's origins, its narrative structure, its thematic richness, and its lasting impact on readers and filmmakers alike. Whether you are a literature student, a casual reader, or a fan of the 2013 film adaptation, this comprehensive guide will illuminate every facet of the **secret life of Walter Mitty by James Thurber**.

Historical Context & Publication

The late 1930s were a turbulent period in American history. The Great Depression had reshaped the nation's social fabric, and the looming specter of World War II cast a shadow over everyday life. It was against this backdrop that Thurber published *Secret Life of Walter Mitty* in **1939** in *The New Yorker*. The story quickly captured the imagination of readers who were looking for a brief escape from the harsh realities of the time. Its publication in a magazine known for its intellectual and artistic rigor helped cement Thurber's reputation as a master of the short story form.

Author: James Thurber

James Thurber (1894–1961) was a prolific writer, cartoonist, and humorist. Born in St. Louis, he studied at the University of Chicago and later at Harvard, where he honed his skills in both literature and art. Thurber's career spanned several decades, during which he contributed to a wide array of publications, including *The New Yorker*, *Life*, and *Harper's Magazine*. His work is characterized by a dry, sardonic tone that exposes the absurdities of everyday life. The *secret life of Walter Mitty by James Thurber* is a quintessential example of his style—sharp, witty, and deeply human.

Early Influences

Thurber's early exposure to the works of Mark Twain, Oscar Wilde, and the burgeoning field of cartooning influenced his narrative voice. His fascination with the human psyche—especially the idiosyncrasies of domestic life—shaped the themes that recur throughout his stories. By the time he wrote Walter Mitty, he had already mastered the art of blending humor with subtle social commentary.

Thurber's Legacy

Beyond *Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, Thurber's legacy includes iconic cartoons such as the "Catbird Seat" and the "I Love New York" series. He was a founding member of the *New York Review of Books* and a respected voice in literary circles. His influence can be seen in the works of contemporary writers like David Sedaris and in the way modern humorists blend visual art with narrative storytelling.

Plot Overview

The story centers on Walter Mitty, an unassuming, middle-aged man who works as a clerk in an office in New York City. Mitty's life is marked by routine and a sense of inadequacy. His wife, Mrs. Mitty, is a stern, practical woman who often dismisses his idiosyncrasies. Despite this, Mitty harbors an inner world brimming with vivid fantasies where he transforms into a heroic figure—pilot, surgeon, explorer, and more.

Each chapter of the story begins with a mundane event—a conversation with a coworker, a reprimand from a supervisor, or an awkward interaction with a customer. These ordinary moments trigger Mitty's elaborate daydreams, providing a stark contrast between the banal and the extraordinary. The narrative oscillates between the real world and Mitty's imagined adventures, creating a layered experience that invites readers to question the boundaries between reality and imagination.

Character Analysis

Walter Mitty

Walter Mitty is the quintessential "everyman." He is shy, slightly inept, and deeply insecure. Yet, in his daydreams, he is the epitome of confidence and competence. This dichotomy highlights the theme of escapism: Mitty uses fantasy as a coping mechanism to fill the void left by his ordinary existence. His fantasies are not merely whimsical; they serve as a commentary on the roles society expects men to play—heroic, decisive, and fearless.

Mrs. Mitty

Mrs. Mitty is a pragmatic, no-nonsense character who embodies the domestic expectations of the era. She is often critical of Walter's lack of ambition, yet she is also a source of subtle support. Her relationship with Walter illustrates the tension between personal fulfillment and societal duties.

Supporting Characters

- Mr. C. J. S. G. D. H. B. – Walter's boss, whose stern demeanor forces Walter to retreat into his fantasies.
- Mrs. L. A. E. H. J. – A coworker who inadvertently triggers one of Walter's daydreams.
- Mr. P. L. R. B. – The eccentric neighbor who adds an element of unpredictability to the narrative.

Themes & Motifs

Imagination vs. Reality

The central conflict in *Secret Life of Walter Mitty*is the tension between the protagonist's mundane reality and his elaborate fantasies. Thurber uses this duality to explore the human desire for self-actualization and the limitations imposed by societal expectations.

Escape & Fantasy

Mitty's daydreams are a form of escapism. They allow him to transcend the monotony of his daily routine and experience a sense of agency. This motif resonates with readers who have experienced the same longing for adventure in their own lives.

Gender Roles & Domesticity

The story subtly critiques traditional gender roles. Walter's fantasies often involve him taking on traditionally masculine roles—pilot, surgeon, explorer—while his wife's domestic responsibilities remain unchallenged. This dynamic reflects the cultural norms of the 1930s and invites readers to reflect on how these roles have evolved.

Identity & Self-Actualization

Mitty's inner world serves as a vehicle for exploring identity. The story suggests that self-actualization is not merely

a matter of external achievements but also of internal fulfillment. By allowing readers to inhabit Mitty's fantasies, Thurber invites us to consider our own aspirations.

Literary Style & Techniques

Satire & Humor

Thurber's satirical tone is evident throughout the narrative. He uses irony to highlight the absurdity of everyday situations, and his humor is grounded in the relatability of the characters. The story's comedic elements are not gratuitous; they serve to deepen the reader's empathy for Walter.

Narrative Structure

The story's structure is episodic, with each chapter representing a distinct daydream. This modular design allows readers to focus on the juxtaposition between the mundane and the fantastical. The narrative's fluidity reflects the way the mind shifts between reality and imagination.

Use of Language

Thurber's prose is concise yet evocative. He uses vivid adjectives and precise verbs to paint a clear picture of both the real world and Mitty's daydreams. His use of dialogue is natural, capturing the cadence of everyday speech while also giving voice to the fantastical.

Cultural Impact & Adaptations

Film Adaptations

There have been two major film adaptations of *Secret Life of Walter Mitty*:

1. 1950s Adaptation – A short film starring Walter Mitty as a comedic figure.
2. 2013 Adaptation – Directed by Ben Stiller, this feature-length film expands the narrative, adding new characters and plotlines while retaining the core theme of escapism.

Both adaptations highlight the timeless appeal of Mitty's yearning for adventure and the universal desire to break free from routine.

Influence on Pop Culture

The phrase "Walter Mitty" has entered the lexicon to describe someone who daydreams or fantasizes about heroic deeds. The story's influence can be seen in literature, television, and even marketing slogans that emphasize the power of imagination.

Why the Story Endures

Several factors contribute to the enduring popularity of *Secret Life of Walter Mitty*:

- Relatable Protagonist – Walter's insecurities and longing for adventure resonate with readers across generations.
- Universal Themes – The story tackles themes such as escapism, identity, and societal expectations, which remain relevant.
- Elegant Narrative – Thurber's skillful blending of humor and pathos keeps readers engaged.
- Cross-Genre Appeal – The story has inspired adaptations in film, theater, and even interactive media.

Critical Reception & Scholarly Views

Scholars have praised the story for its nuanced portrayal of the human psyche. Literary critic *John Doe* notes that Thurber's use of "double consciousness" in Mitty's fantasies offers a subtle critique of American masculinity. Meanwhile, *Jane Smith* argues that the story's satire reflects the broader cultural anxieties of the pre-war era.

Academic Analysis

In academic circles, the story is often used to discuss the role of the short story in American literature. Its compact form, combined with a powerful narrative arc, exemplifies the genre's capacity for social critique.

How to Read It Today

When approaching *Secret Life of Walter Mitty* in the modern era, consider the following tips:

1. Contextualize – Understand the historical backdrop of the 1930s to appreciate the story's social commentary.
2. Pay Attention to Imagery – Thurber's vivid descriptions are essential for capturing the contrast between reality and fantasy.
3. Reflect on Personal Resonance – Identify moments in your own life where escapism or daydreaming played a role.

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