SOFTWARE & TECH

# Secret Life Of Walter Mitty By James Thurber

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795584130298029

## The Enduring Appeal of The Secret Life of Walter Mitty By James Thurber

Few short stories have left as deep an imprint on the cultural imagination as **The Secret Life of Walter Mitty** by James Thurber. First published in *The New Yorker* in 1939, this deceptively simple tale of a meek, middle-aged man who escapes his mundane reality through vivid daydreams has become a touchstone for anyone who has ever felt trapped by the routines of daily life. The story is both a comedy of manners and a poignant exploration of identity, masculinity, and the human need for transcendence. Over eighty years later, the name "Walter Mitty" has entered the lexicon as shorthand for a person who indulges in wishful fantasies to avoid confronting their own limitations. Yet Thurber's original narrative offers far more than just a label; it presents a complex, deeply human portrait that continues to resonate with readers across generations.

Understanding what makes **The Secret Life of Walter Mitty** by James Thurber so enduring requires a close look at its origins, its themes, and its masterful storytelling. This article delves into the background of the story, analyzes its key elements, and examines why it remains a classic of American literature.

## James Thurber: The Man Behind the Myth

James Thurber was a celebrated American humorist, cartoonist, and writer, best known for his contributions to *The New Yorker* during its golden age. His work often blended sharp wit with a gentle, sometimes melancholic, understanding of human foibles. Thurber himself was partially blind due to a childhood injury, and his perspective on the world—one of observation tinged with vulnerability—infused his writing with empathy for the underdog. The character of Walter Mitty was not born in a vacuum; Thurber drew upon his own experiences of feeling powerless in a world dominated by more assertive figures. He once remarked that he "lived in constant terror of people who were sure of themselves," a sentiment that perfectly captures the inner life of his most famous creation.

Thurber published **The Secret Life of Walter Mitty** in 1939, a time when America was still recovering from the Great Depression and facing the looming threat of World War II. The story's themes of escapism and the conflict between imagination and reality struck a chord with readers who were yearning for distraction but also grappling with the pressures of conforming to societal expectations, particularly those of traditional manhood.

## A Brief Plot Summary: From Daydream to Delusion

The story unfolds over the course of a single afternoon as Walter Mitty, a mild-mannered, absent-minded man, drives into town with his wife for their weekly errands. While his wife, Mrs. Mitty, dominates every interaction and criticizes his every move, Walter retreats into a series of elaborate fantasies. In the first daydream, he imagines himself as a fearless Navy commander piloting a hydroplane through a hurricane. This is quickly interrupted by

his wife's nagging. Later, while waiting for her at a parking lot, he becomes a brilliant surgeon saving a millionaire's life. A passing remark about his driving style triggers a third fantasy: he is a sharpshooting assassin on trial. Further errands spark more daydreams—he imagines himself as a daredevil RAF pilot and then as a condemned man facing a firing squad with stoic courage.

Each fantasy presents Walter as confident, heroic, and in command—everything his real life is not. The story ends after his wife departs to get a haircut, leaving Walter waiting on a street corner. He lights a cigarette, leans against a wall, and imagines himself facing a firing squad, smiling as he utters the iconic line: "Does it hurt very much?" The story's final note is ambiguous: is this a final act of defiance, or a complete surrender to fantasy? Thurber leaves the reader to decide.

This tight structure, alternating between drab reality and vivid illusion, is the engine that drives **The Secret Life of Walter Mitty** by James Thurber. The contrast is not just comic; it is deeply revealing of the character's internal struggle.

## Central Themes: Escapism, Masculinity, and the Human Condition

The story is rich with themes that have ensured its longevity. At its heart, it is a study of **escapism**. Walter Mitty does not merely daydream; he constructs elaborate, heroic narratives to shield himself from the humiliation of his daily life. His wife, the garage attendant, and even a passing woman all speak to him with condescension, reinforcing his sense of inadequacy. The daydreams are not just entertainment—they are survival mechanisms. Thurber portrays this with both humor and sympathy, inviting readers to recognize the same tendency in themselves.

Another critical theme is **masculinity**. The story was written during a period when American men were expected to be providers, decision-makers, and figures of authority. Mitty fails at all three. He cannot park the car properly, he forgets to wear his overshoes, and he is openly belittled by his wife. His fantasies, however, are hyper-masculine: he commands ships, performs surgery, faces death bravely. This tension between the ideal and the real speaks to a crisis of masculinity that is still relevant today. Thurber does not mock Mitty for his fantasies; instead, he highlights the societal pressures that make such escapes necessary.

Finally, the story explores the **power of imagination**. Despite the pathos, Thurber never suggests that fantasy is entirely negative. Walter's daydreams allow him to maintain a sense of dignity and individuality. In a world that demands conformity, his secret life is his only private territory. The story asks a profound question: is it better to accept a diminished reality with grace, or to hold onto a vibrant inner world, even at the cost of social ridicule?

## Character Analysis: Walter Mitty as Everyman

Walter Mitty is not a hero, nor is he a fool. He is an **everyman**, a character whose flaws and virtues are universally recognizable. Thurber describes him as "a man's man" in his fantasies, but in the real world, he is hesitant, forgetful, and deeply passive. His wife, whose first name is never given, represents the crushing force of domestic and societal expectations. She is not malicious; she is simply a product of her time, trying to manage a husband she sees as incompetent. The absence of a first name for Mrs. Mitty is a deliberate choice—she is less an individual than a symbol of the external world that Mitty cannot face.

The minor characters—the garage attendant, the parking lot boy, the woman on the street—all serve to reinforce Mitty's inadequacy. Their casual condescension, often wrapped in polite language, is more wounding than outright cruelty. Thurber's genius lies in making the reader feel Mitty's humiliation without ever descending into melodrama. We laugh at his absurd daydreams, but we also wince at the realities that provoke them.

## Literary Style: Humor, Irony, and Juxtaposition

Thurber's style in **The Secret Life of Walter Mitty** is deceptively simple. The prose is clean and unadorned,

juxtaposition with the mundane reality. The shift from fantasy to reality is often abrupt and jarring, emphasizing the gap between Mitty's inner life and his outer circumstances. For instance, in the middle of a dramatic courtroom scene, his wife's voice cuts through: "You're not a young man any longer." This technique amplifies both the humor and the pathos.

Thurber also employs **irony** liberally. Mitty imagines himself as a commander steering a ship through a storm, but in reality he cannot even steer a car without his wife's supervision. He dreams of being a brilliant surgeon, but his real-world actions are fumbling and uncertain. This contrast creates a rich layer of dramatic irony that keeps readers engaged. The story's humor is never mean-spirited; it arises from the absurdity of the situation combined with a deep affection for Mitty's humanity.

Furthermore, the narrative voice is deliberately understated. Thurber does not editorialize; he simply presents Mitty's thoughts and the external events. This restraint lets the reader draw their own conclusions and, in doing so, become complicit in the daydreams. We are inside Mitty's head, sharing his escapes, which makes the eventual return to reality all the more jarring.

## Cultural Impact and Modern Adaptations

Few works of short fiction have generated such a lasting cultural footprint. The term "Mittyesque" is now used to describe anyone lost in grandiose daydreams. The story itself has been adapted into two major films. The first, released in 1947, starred Danny Kaye and turned the story into a lighthearted romantic comedy. The more recent adaptation, directed by and starring Ben Stiller in 2013, took significant liberties, transforming Walter Mitty into a photo-negative retoucher at *Life* magazine who embarks on a real-life global adventure. While the film received mixed reviews, it introduced the story to a new generation and sparked renewed interest in Thurber's original text.

The story has also influenced countless other works, from television shows like *The Simpsons* to novels and plays. Its themes of **escapism and identity** are timeless, and the character of Walter Mitty has become a archetype. In an age of social media, where people curate idealized versions of their lives, the relevance of Mitty's secret life has only grown. The line between reality and fantasy blurs more than ever, making Thurber's story feel remarkably contemporary.

## Relevance in the Digital Age: The New Secret Lives

Why does **The Secret Life of Walter Mitty** by James Thurber continue to speak to us? Perhaps because the modern world offers even more avenues for escapism. Smartphones, streaming services, social media, video games—all provide portals into alternate realities where we can be more powerful, more successful, or more interesting than we feel in our day-to-day lives. The "Mittyesque" daydream is no longer just a private mental exercise; it's a public performance, with likes and comments as validation.

Yet the fundamental dilemma remains the same: how do we balance the need for imaginative escape with the demands of real life? Thurber's story does not offer easy answers. It does not recommend that Mitty abandon his dreams, nor does it suggest he should retreat entirely into them. Instead, it presents the tension honestly, with a mix of humor and empathy. In doing so, it reminds us that the secret life is not a sign of weakness, but a testament to the richness of the human mind.

## Conclusion: A Masterpiece of the Short Story Form

In just a few thousand words, James Thurber created a character that transcends time and place. **The Secret Life of Walter Mitty** by James Thurber is far more than a comic tale of a daydreamer; it is a profound meditation on identity, freedom, and the quiet courage required to face a world that often diminishes us. Thurber's genius lies in his ability to make us laugh while simultaneously breaking our hearts. The story

remains required reading for anyone who wants to understand the power of short fiction—and the enduring human need for a secret life of our own. Whether you are discovering Walter Mitty for the first time or returning to his daydreams after many years, his story continues to offer both comfort and challenge, reminding us that the line between reality and imagination is never quite as solid as we think.

## Related Articles


- **Are James Blunt And Emily Blunt Related**
  URL: https://signage.openstack.org/are-james-blunt-and-emily-blunt-related.pdf
- **Was Remember Me Based On A True Story**
  URL: https://signage.openstack.org/was-remember-me-based-on-a-true-story.pdf
- **Ess Employee Self Service Costco**
  URL: https://signage.openstack.org/ess-employee-self-service-costco.pdf
- **The Case For Christianity By Cs Lewis**
  URL: https://signage.openstack.org/the-case-for-christianity-by-cs-lewis.pdf


### TOPIC INDEX

#secret • #life • #walter • #mitty • #james

DIGITAL EDITION

secret-life-of-walter-mitty-by-james-thurber

DIGITAL EDITION

secret-life-of-walter-mitty-by-james-thurber

DIGITAL EDITION

secret-life-of-walter-mitty-by-james-thurber

DIGITAL EDITION

secret-life-of-walter-mitty-by-james-thurber