SOFTWARE & TECH

The Secret Life Of Walter Mitty James Thurber

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Introduction: A Window Into the Wandering Mind

Few short stories in American literature have achieved the cultural saturation of **The Secret Life of Walter Mitty Story**. Published in *The New Yorker* in 1939, James Thurber's tale of a mild-mannered man who escapes his mundane existence through vivid daydreams has become more than a beloved piece of fiction—it has entered the lexicon as a shorthand for anyone who retreats into a rich inner world.

The story follows Walter Mitty, a henpecked husband running errands with his wife, who repeatedly slips into elaborate fantasies where he is a fearless commander, a brilliant surgeon, a crack marksman, and more. These daydreams are interrupted by the humiliating demands of reality. On the surface, it is a comical portrait of a man lost in thought. Beneath that, it is a profound meditation on identity, creativity, and the quiet rebellions of the human spirit.

This article takes you deep into **The Secret Life of Walter Mitty Story**—its origins, characters, themes, film adaptations, and why it continues to speak to us in an age of constant distraction. Whether you are a student studying the text, a film lover curious about the 2013 movie, or someone who has ever felt like Mitty yourself, this guide offers a complete and thoughtful exploration.

The Origins: James Thurber and the Birth of a Classic

Thurber's Vision

James Thurber was a celebrated humorist and cartoonist for *The New Yorker*, known for his wry observations of everyday life. **The Secret Life of Walter Mitty Story** was published in the magazine on March 18, 1939, and later collected in his book *My World—and Welcome to It* (1942). Thurber drew inspiration from his own tendency to daydream, as well as from the stifling social expectations of mid-century America.

The story is remarkably short—only a few thousand words—yet it achieves an extraordinary emotional range. Thurber uses a technique of abrupt transitions between fantasy and reality, often marked by a sharp sound or a nagging voice. This structural device mirrors the way daydreams actually intrude upon and are shattered by daily life.

The Cultural Climate of 1939

Published on the eve of World War II, the story resonated with readers who felt trapped by economic hardship, gender roles, and the mounting anxieties of a world at war. Mitty's fantasies often involve heroism and command—roles that stand in stark contrast to his powerlessness in real life. This tension between inner grandeur and outer meekness struck a chord that has never faded.

The Real Walter Mitty

In the real world, Walter Mitty is a man in his fifties, married to a domineering woman named Mrs. Mitty. He is forgetful, passive, and perpetually scolded. He drives slowly, wears galoshes at his wife's insistence, and cannot even remember to buy puppy biscuits without being reminded. He is the archetype of the henpecked husband, a figure both comic and tragic.

Thurber never gives us Mitty's inner thoughts directly in the real-world scenes—only his actions and his wife's commands. This narrative choice emphasizes how little autonomy Mitty has. He is defined by what others tell him to do.

The Fantastical Walter Mitty

Mitty's daydreams reveal the man he wishes he could be. In five distinct fantasies, he becomes:

- Commander of a Navy hydroplane – brave, decisive, facing a storm.
- A world-class surgeon – coolly performing a delicate operation.
- A British RAF pilot – nonchalantly facing impossible odds.
- A sharpshooter on trial – confident and deadly accurate.
- A man facing a firing squad – stoic and unafraid.

Each fantasy highlights a quality Mitty lacks in reality: authority, skill, courage, precision, and dignity. The daydreams are not random; they are precise psychological compensations for the humiliations he endures.

The Daydreams vs. Reality: A Closer Look

Fantasy 1: The Commander

The story opens with Mitty driving his car, but we are immediately pulled into his fantasy of commanding a naval vessel through a hurricane. The language is dramatic and cinematic: "The Old Man ain't afraid of Hell!" The dream ends when his wife says, "You're driving too fast!" Mitty meekly slows down.

This contrast—between the commanding officer and the scolded husband—sets the pattern for the entire story. Each fantasy elevates Mitty to a position of control; each interruption reminds him of his powerlessness.

Fantasy 2: The Surgeon

Passing a hospital triggers a fantasy where Mitty is a celebrated surgeon saving a millionaire from a rare ailment. He speaks with authority, using medical jargon. The dream shatters when a parking lot attendant says, "Back it up, Mac!" Mitty fumbles with the gears.

Fantasy 3: The RAF Pilot

While reading a magazine article about war, Mitty imagines himself as a Royal Air Force pilot volunteering for a suicide mission. He is calm, witty, and heroic. The dream ends when he hears his wife say, "You're not a young man, Walter."

Fantasy 4: The Sharpshooter

In his most elaborate fantasy, Mitty is on trial for murdering a man who insulted his sweetheart. He proves his marksmanship by shooting a fly off a table. The fantasy is interrupted by a newsboy shouting about a trial—a clever blurring of dream and reality.

Fantasy 5: The Firing Squad

The final fantasy is brief but poignant. Mitty faces a firing squad, refusing a blindfold and smoking a cigarette. This dream suggests a desire for a dignified end—perhaps even a death that would free him from his life. It is

the most ambiguous and haunting of the daydreams.

Themes and Symbolism in The Secret Life of Walter Mitty Story

Escapism and the Inner Life

The most obvious theme is escapism. Mitty uses daydreams to survive the tedium and indignity of his daily existence. Thurber does not condemn this—he portrays it as both comic and necessary. In a world that demands conformity, the imagination is the last refuge of the self.

This theme resonates deeply in the 21st century, where we have endless tools for distraction: social media, streaming, video games. Mitty's daydreams are an analog version of scrolling through a feed—a way to be somewhere else.

Marriage and Domesticity

The story offers a sharp critique of mid-century marriage. Mrs. Mitty is portrayed as controlling and dismissive. She speaks to Walter as if he were a child. The story was written at a time when gender roles were rigid, and many readers saw Mitty as a symbol of men's silent suffering in domestic life.

Interestingly, modern readings also question whether Mrs. Mitty might have her own secret life—a woman trapped in a marriage to a man who is never fully present.

Identity and Authenticity

Which Walter Mitty is real? The meek man or the brave commander? Thurber suggests that both are real. Mitty's fantasies are not lies but expressions of his potential. The story raises the question: Are we defined by our actions or by our imaginations?

Mortality and Meaning

The final fantasy of the firing squad introduces a darker theme: death as an escape. Mitty imagines death with dignity because his life lacks it. This gives the story an existential weight that elevates it above simple comedy.

From Page to Screen: The 2013 Film Adaptation

A Major Departure

In 2013, Ben Stiller directed and starred in a feature film adaptation of **The Secret Life of Walter Mitty Story**. The film is a drastic departure from Thurber's original. Gone is the henpecked husband; instead, we meet a negative asset manager at *Life*magazine who daydreams of romance and adventure. The film follows Mitty on a real journey to Greenland, Iceland, and the Himalayas in search of a missing photograph.

The movie is less about escapism and more about **self-actualization**—Mitty learns to turn his fantasies into reality. This is a fundamentally different message from the story, which suggests that fantasy and reality are both valid aspects of a person.

What the Film Gets Right

Despite the changes, the film captures the spirit of Thurber's work: the idea that there is more to a quiet person than meets the eye. The cinematography is stunning, and the soundtrack—featuring songs like "Stay Alive" by José González—reinforces the theme of waking up to your own life.

The film also introduces a love interest, Cheryl Melhoff (Kristen Wiig), who serves as both a muse and a mirror. It is a more optimistic, Hollywood-friendly version of the story.

What the Film Misses

Purists argue that the film misses Thurber's irony and ambiguity. In the story, Mitty does not change—he simply

daydreams and is pulled back to reality. The film suggests that you can become your fantasies. Thurber might have found that naïve.

Still, the film introduced **The Secret Life of Walter Mitty Story** to a new generation. It sparked discussions about living authentically and taking risks.

Cultural Impact: The Walter Mitty Syndrome

The story has had an enormous cultural impact. The term "Walter Mitty" is now used to describe someone who habitually daydreams or invents an idealized version of their life. It appears in newspapers, books, and everyday conversation.

In psychology, "Walter Mitty syndrome" is sometimes used—informally—to refer to maladaptive daydreaming or pathological lying. However, most uses of the term are more sympathetic, acknowledging daydreaming as a common human experience.

The story has been referenced in countless works of popular culture, from *The Simpsons* to *Seinfeld*. It has been adapted for radio, television, and stage. Its influence is woven into the fabric of modern storytelling.

Why The Secret Life of Walter Mitty Story Still Matters

In an Age of Digital Escapism

We all have a Walter Mitty inside us. We scroll through curated social media feeds, imagining other lives. We binge-watch shows and play video games. Mitty's daydreams are the original escape room—a private world where we are braver, smarter, and more interesting than we feel.

The story reminds us that daydreaming is not a waste of time. It is a way of processing our desires, fears, and hopes. It is how we rehearse who we want to be.

A Lesson in Empathy

Thurber asks us to look at quiet people and wonder what worlds they inhabit. The person sitting silently on the bus, the colleague who never speaks in meetings—they may be having an epic adventure inside their own mind. The story teaches us not to judge by appearances.

The Balance Between Dream and Action

Perhaps the most enduring lesson of **The Secret Life of Walter Mitty Story** is the need for balance. Dreams without action are empty; but action without dreams is lifeless. Mitty's tragedy is that he cannot bridge the gap. The film

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