

## Theme, Characterization and Artistic Features of *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*

### THÈME , CARACTÉRISATION ET CARACTÉRISTIQUES ARTISTIQUES DE *LA VIE SECRÈTE DE WALTER MITTY*

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**Abstract:** James Thurber has been called one of the world's greatest humorists. The Secret Life of Walter Mitty, his best-known story, shows us the social reality and people's state of mind in America by vividly describing the mixture of reality and fantasy of Walter Mitty. The artistic features such as symbol and allusion thoroughly demonstrates the unique style of James Thurber, that is humor mixed with serious theme.

**Key words:** theme, characterization, artistic features

**Résumé:** James Thurber est considéré comme un des meilleurs humoristes du monde . Son chef-d'oeuvre *la vie secrète de Walter Mitty*, nous montre la réalité sociale et l'état d'âme des gens aux états-unis à travers la description vivifiante du mélange de réalité et la fantaisie de Walter Mitty . Les caractéristiques artistiques , telles que le symbole et l'allusion démontre complètement l'humour mélangé avec de sérieux thèmes .

**Mots-clés:** thème, caractérisation, caractéristique, artistique

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty is the best-known story of James Thurber, who is one of the most famous humorists in America. The story was written in 1939 and regarded as a retrospective comment on the Great Depression, during which life became a nightmarish experience of want, poverty, and absolute misery. As Americans during the Depression sought to relieve the dullness and dreariness of their lives, they turned to movies for their heroes and for escape. "There's a Paramount picture probably around the corner. See it and you will be out of yourself, living someone else's life." The story tells us about Walter Mitty, a henpecked man with extravagant daydreams to escape from the unhappy and humiliated real world such as a heroic pilot in the war, a world-famous surgeon and even a soldier facing a firing squad fearlessly. After the publication of the story, Walter Mitty is known to all the people to describe a certain kind of neurotic, daydreaming man. So Walter Mitty is regarded to be of obvious social characteristics and may be rated as an archetypal American figure. There are, Thurber suggests, no daring young men any more, only worn out and ludicrous middle-aged ones who make themselves look even more foolish by placing themselves in situations into which only daring young

men should enter. In the story, I believe, Thurber touches the mentality of the Great Depression most intimately. Whether the theme or the characterization or the artistic features of the story is impressive and worthwhile studying after the reading. Therefore, I give a brief analysis from the above three aspects in the following.

#### 1. THEME

The title of the story implies that it is about the secret life or the inner world of the protagonist. Therefore the theme is displayed completely through the mixture of the reality and the fantasies of Walter Mitty. There are five dreams in all in the whole story: becoming an intrepid pilot, a famous surgeon, a crack shot, a brilliant general and a brave soldier, which in fact are the so-called "American dream" for many people. Then we have to make clear what the conflict is between dream and reality. In the opening paragraph Walter Mitty is driving his wife to for a beauty shop in town. Triggered by the wild storm, he begins to imagine himself as the commander of a Navy hydroplane. He dreams that the plane has got into

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trouble but the crew all show great confidence on his ability to get rid of it. The crew think, "The old man will get us through and the Old Man ain't afraid of Hell!" While at the very moment, Mitty is brought back from this daydream by his wife, as she says, "Not so fast! You're driving too fast! What are you driving so fast for?" When Walter Mitty drives passing a hospital he fantasizes that he has saved a millionaire banker without any difficulty, which is out of the question for the other famous doctor. But the garage attendant jolts him back to reality and even makes fun of him. In the following a newsboy went by shouting something about the Waterbury trial. At this he fantasizes that he is on trial for murder being a crack shot and "could have shot Gregory Fitzhurst at three hundred feet with my left hand". Finally during the fantasy, he remembers the puppy biscuits by the curse "You miserable cur!" and speaks it out loud. So he is pulled back by his subconscious murmuring of puppy biscuit and the laughing of a passing woman. Because his wife would be through in 15 minutes, he goes to the hotel where he meets her and begins to read an old magazine probably published during WWII. When the title "Can Germany Conquer the world Through the Air?" comes into sight he enters the fourth dream where he is a general in the war. But it is shattered by the arrival of his wife who begins immediately to scold him for hiding from her and not putting on his overshoes. On their way home his wife forgets something and goes back. During the course of waiting, Mitty sets off his final dream that he is facing a firing squad fearlessly. All life situations in his dreams are much more appropriate to his true inner nature than the dull existence he really has. Every time when he is daydreaming he will be brought back to unpleasant reality by some outside things or the persons in the real life, which shows that though the reality is not good to him he has to face it without hesitation.

From the above, it is deeply demonstrated about the real life and the state of mind of the middle-class citizens in New York City at that time. Because in fact he is only a nobody without any attention by others even by his wife and fails in real life to such an extent that he even cannot back a car. We can say it is only a beautiful and attractive dream shared by most of the Americans. As for American dream, with the essence of success, it means in the America society everyone has the equal right and all the people are equal and free and can achieve success so long as he works hard. Mitty is just a case in point. He cannot get respect from others in his real life so he seeks to escape from the routine drudgery of his suburban life into fantasies of heroic conquest, only by which can he feel comforted so as to realize his ideals. Through tiny connections between them, Mitty's "real" world and his "fantasies" have melded into one, which is in fact the only way Mitty keeps sane. Consequently, it is not exaggerated to say that the fantasy is only a weak spiritual prop for him to survive in the society.

The story ends with the sentence "Then, with that faint, fleeting smile playing about his lips, he faced the

firing squad; erect and motionless, proud and disdainful, Walter Mitty the Undefeated, inscrutable to the last." Apparently the sudden ending is unacceptable and not understandable for readers. However, with a further thought it is much more practical and leaves us much space to think about because it implies that there are so many social problems in American society with no answers.

## 2. CHARACTERIZATION

Walter Mitty and his wife are characterized vividly through the description of their conversations and acts to achieve an objective effect. Mitty is a typical petty bourgeois that succeeds in nothing even backing cars or taking chains off. He is unhappy, ineffectual and dominated by his wife, day-dreaming every day. Before his wife had her hair done, she asked Mitty to buy the overshoes regardless of his refusal by saying, "We've been all through that and you are not a young man any longer". Then she asked him to put on his gloves in a commanding tone. Mitty had no choice but to submit to her passively. When he drives too fast his wife says, "You're tensed up again and I wish you'd let Dr. Renshaw look you over." In the hotel she says, "I'm going to take your temperature when I get you home." For her, Mitty is neurotic and even insane. With his wife he seems to have no opportunities to act in his own way just like a silently observing animal. In his mind, "She seemed grossly unfamiliar, like a strange woman who had yelled at him in a crowd." He is also timid without confidence on himself because he does not face the reality courageously but depends on daydreaming to escape real life instead of taking practical measures to change his fate.

At the same time, the image of the snarling and domineering wife is portrayed thoroughly in the sharp contrast with Mitty. However, does she really tend to act the way that she did? Taking the social background into consideration, under the influence of the Great Depression everything seemed to be disintegrating all of a sudden and all at once, and an ordered, rational existence proved to be impossible. All the people are under great pressure. For women they suffer much more because they are troubled by the serious social situation and also bear the pressure in such a man-dominating society. So in her inner heart she feels lonely and longs for dependence of a sense of safety. She keeps a puppy at home, which is looked as a close companion. In the story, we know "She didn't like to get to the hotel first and she would want him to be there waiting for her as usual." She is fragile in her nature and wants to be cared for. But the serious reality forces her to act violently so as to survive in the society. There is a sign of a weak mind beneath her violent appearance. What's more, in her conversation with her husband, Mitty, though not in a friendly way there is a hint of affection like a mother to her child. For example, when Mitty refuses to buy overshoes she says,

“You’re not a young man any longer.” Even if she insists on the overshoes for Mitty she is for his good. In a word, whether for Walter Mitty or for his wife, it is the American society of the time that causes their characters.

### 3. ARTISTIC FEATURES

At last the artistic features of the story should be paid much attention to. Symbol and allusion are employed in the story to strengthen the connotation of the theme and also the characterization. First, Waterbury trial is mentioned when Mitty passed by a newsboy. The Waterbury trial, which happened in 1938, is the important historical allusion. But in the story Mitty typically gets all wrong about it. The newsboy’s shouting about the trial precipitates Mitty into a fantasy in which he is on trial for murder, but the actual Waterbury trial involved large scale and high-level graft and corruption. Thurber uses the allusion to add a subtle touch to his characterization of Mitty and to enlarge the frame of reference of his story to include other characters who, like Mitty, have led secret and prohibited lives. It may also be worth remarking that the same year in which Walter Mitty was invented saw the debut of Superman, a character who is able to solve apparently unsolvable problems and whose secret life is lived as a Walter Mittyish fellow named Clark Kent. The disjunction between his real and his imaginary self reverses the comic split in Walter Mitty. The widespread popularity of both Walter Mitty and Superman throughout the 1940s

suggests that they are bound to have spoken out something commonly existed in all the American experience.

Besides, symbol is another artistic feature. Mitty’s wife asks him to buy overshoes steadily in the beginning of the story. Though he is unwilling he gets them at last. And then his wife asks him to put on his gloves, but after her departure he takes them off immediately. So the overshoes and the gloves symbolize the outer pressure imposed on him. Mitty is reluctant to submit to the forced power in his deep heart but he accepts it at last. He wants to resist but in vain just because of his incompetence and his weakness. In addition, the sound of “ta-pocketa-pocketa-pocket” appears several times. And every time it comes out Mitty is undertaking splendid things—helping others out of trouble. Therefore, it is symbolic of a life-saving machine, which will help him to satisfy his heroic desire in his dream.

James Thurber displays a humorous story for us on the surface. He has carefully constructed the story’s narrative to connect Mitty’s “secret life” with his external life. However, he walks a slender tightrope between laughter and pity manifesting a comic style that is never folksy but still quintessentially American. It leaves us much to consider about the life and also the reality with the influence of the Depression. Walter Mitty was even taken up by psychologist to put forward “Walter Mitty Syndrome” in a British medical journal as a clinical condition, which manifested itself in compulsive fantasizing. Therefore, we can imagine the important role that this story plays in the world.

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