The Secret Life of Walter Mitty

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES THURBER

James Thurber was born in Columbus, Ohio in 1894. After attending The Ohio State University and moving to New York in 1925, Thurber became an editor at *The New Yorker* magazine in 1927. He first published his own work in the magazine in 1930, continuing to publish with the magazine even after he moved to Connecticut in 1936. Thurber became one of the most well-known and beloved humorists in America, known best for the short stories and cartoons that were published primarily in *The New Yorker* and subsequently collected in numerous books. He was also the author of a play that was later made into a movie starring Henry Fonda. Thurber was twice married, the first to Althea Adams was troubled almost from its beginning in 1922 and ended in divorce in 1935; the second, to Helen Wismer, lasted from its beginning in 1935 until his death. Thurber died in 1961 at the age of 65, after pneumonia set in following emergency surgery on a blood clot in his brain.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Great Depression of the 1930s gave American men a widespread sense of impotence and failure as economic forces beyond their control left them unemployed and unable to provide for their families. For relief, Americans turned to the kind of escapist genre fiction and films parodied in Walter Mitty's fantasies, featuring dashing heroes like Errol Flynn in hypermasculine roles. 1939 marked the transition from this long period of anxiety into a more prosperous era, with the comfortable routines of middle-class consumer culture representing the new American Dream. Thurber makes a couple of specific allusions to local and world events: Mitty hears a newsboy on the street shouting about the Waterbury Trial of 1938, in which the mayor of Waterbury (also the lieutenant governor of Connecticut) and more than 20 other city officials were indicted for corruption and taxpayer fraud. It was the first such scandal in Connecticut history, and local residents were shocked to learn about their lawmakers' corrupt "secret lives." Mitty also picks up a magazine with the cover story "Can Germany Conquer the World Through the Air?" which refers to the growing power of the German military at the start of World War II in Europe—a situation that accounts both for the presence of war on Mitty's mind and for anxieties about strength from America as a whole.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Rip Van Winkle" by Washington Irving (1819) is a much earlier example of a short story about a henpecked husband trying to escape from his wife, though his escapes into nature and fantasy are literal rather than imaginary, testifying to the dramatic cultural and physical differences in America in the hundred and twenty years between the publication of these stories. Everyman characters like Mitty are also common throughout mid-twentieth-century literature in works such as John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* (1960).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Secret Life of Walter Mitty
- **When Written:** 1939
- **Where Written:** Connecticut
- **When Published:** March 18, 1939, in *The New Yorker*; collected in *My World—and Welcome To It* (1942)
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short Story/Humor
- **Setting:** Waterbury, Connecticut, around the winter of 1938-1939
- **Climax:** Walter Mitty stands before the firing squad in his fantasy
- **Antagonist:** Mrs. Mitty
- **Point of View:** Close third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Eighth-Grade Prophecy. As an eighth-grader, Thurber was chosen to write the "class prophecy" for his graduating junior high school class. His prediction reads like one of Walter Mitty's fantasies: the students go on an adventure in a "Seairoplane" and nearly crash before James Thurber saves the day._

Writing Methods. When he first arrived in New York in 1926, Thurber spent many hours painstakingly perfecting and polishing stories and humor pieces to submit to *The New Yorker* and other magazines, but his submissions were always rejected. He sold his first piece to the *New Yorker* after his wife, Althea Adams Thurber, advised him to set an alarm clock for forty-five minutes and submit whatever he had when it rang.

PLOT SUMMARY

A naval commander is captaining a "huge, hurtling, eight-engined Navy hydroplane" through a terrible storm. Though his lieutenant fears he can't make it, the Commander insists on full speed ahead, and the admiring crew expresses its faith in his

abilities. Suddenly, Mrs. Mitty calls out a warning not to drive so fast, and it is revealed that the naval commander was part of a fantasy Walter Mitty has been having as he drives his **car.** As Mitty's fantasy fades, Mrs. Mitty suggests that he see Dr. Renshaw for a checkup.

Walter Mitty drops Mrs. Mitty off at the hair salon in Waterbury, Connecticut. As she gets out of the car, she reminds him to buy a pair of **overshoes**, cutting off his protest that he doesn't need them by saying, "You're not a young man any longer." Mitty puts on his **gloves** when his wife asks why he isn't wearing them, but takes them off as soon as she has gotten out of the car and he is stopped at a red light, out of sight. When the light changes, a cop snaps at him to hurry, and Mitty puts the gloves back on before he drives away.

When he drives past the hospital, Mitty falls into another fantasy. A famous millionaire, Wellington McMillan, is suffering from "obstreosis of the ductal tract," and the doctors performing his surgery—including Dr. Renshaw and two visiting specialists—need Mitty's help. Mitty graciously accepts the specialists' compliments, and saves the day when a machine breaks down by replacing a faulty piston with a fountain pen. However, before he can make his first cut, a shout from the parking-lot attendant interrupts the fantasy: Mitty has driven into the exit-only lane. Dazed, he tries to correct his mistake, but the attendant takes over, re-parking the car "with insolent skill."

As he walks along Main Street, Mitty remembers another incident in which he had tried to remove his car's tire chains, only to end up with them wound around the axles, and another "young, grinning garageman" had to come and help him. Ever since, Mrs. Mitty has made him drive to a garage whenever the chains need changing. Mitty plans to wear his right arm in a **sling** the next time he goes to a garage, so that the garageman will see that he couldn't have taken the chains off himself and will not grin at him. Mitty then buys the overshoes, but has trouble remembering what else Mrs. Mitty told him to buy.

Hearing a newsboy shouting something about a trial, Mitty has a fantasy in which he is on trial for murder. When his attorney claims that he could not have committed the crime because his arm was in a sling, Mitty announces that he could have made the shot that killed the victim even with his left hand. As chaos breaks out in the courtroom, a beautiful woman appears in Mitty's arms, and the District Attorney attacks her. Mitty punches him, calling him a "miserable cur"… which reminds him, back in reality, that he was supposed to buy puppy biscuit. A passing woman laughs at Mitty for saying "Puppy biscuit" aloud to himself. Though Mitty is already near a grocery store, he is embarrassed by the woman's laughter and goes out of his way to request "some biscuit for small, young dogs," at a smaller store further up the street.

Mitty makes sure to arrive first at the hotel where he will meet Mrs. Mitty after her hairstyling appointment, because she doesn't like to get there before him. While he's waiting at the hotel, he sees a magazine headline about whether Germany's air force can conquer the world and imagines himself as Captain Mitty, a British fighter pilot. Mitty's copilot is unable to fly, and so Mitty volunteers to fly alone. A young, deferential sergeant describes the danger of the mission and advises Mitty not to go, but Mitty (drinking several shots of brandy, to the sergeant's admiration) speaks carelessly about the possibility of death. Just as Captain Mitty is leaving the dugout to get into the plane, Mrs. Mitty arrives at the hotel and scolds her husband for sitting in a hard-to-find spot and for not putting on his overshoes yet. In a rare moment of defending himself, Mitty asks, "Does it ever occur to you that I am sometimes thinking?" Mrs. Mitty says she will take his temperature once she gets him home.

On the way back to the car, Mrs. Mitty asks her husband to wait while she buys something at a drugstore. While he leans against the wall, he imagines he is standing before a firing squad. Scornfully saying, "To hell with the **handkerchief**," Mitty bravely and proudly faces his imaginary death, describing himself as "Walter Mitty the Undefeated, inscrutable to the last."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Walter Mitty – The decidedly unheroic hero of the story, Mitty is a meek and henpecked husband who fantasizes about heroic acts in order to escape his mundane life and unhappy marriage. His alter egos—a naval commander, a renowned surgeon, a skilled gunman, a fighter pilot, and a prisoner in front of a firing squad—are brave, strong, mysterious men who command respect, control their lives, and always keep their cool in the face of death and danger. In reality, however, Mitty is inept with machinery, hypersensitive to embarrassment, and struggles to maintain a sense of control over his own life.

Mrs. Mitty – Walter Mitty's nagging wife. Domineering and demanding, she controls every aspect of her husband's behavior, from whether he wears his **gloves** to how fast he drives the **car**. While she believes she is acting for Mitty's own good—her insistence that he buy a pair of overshoes, for instance, is part of her ongoing concern about his health—her criticism is often unreasonable, and her tendency to attribute Mitty's unhappiness to physical illness shows her failure to understand his psychological needs.

Parking-Lot Attendant and Grinning Garagemen – Young, cocky men who, Walter Mitty feels, judge him for not being able to handle his car. The parking-lot attendant parks Mitty's car with what Mitty sees as "insolent skill," while the garagemen grin at Mitty as they remove his tire chains. Although Mitty's

reaction to these characters groups them together, only the parking-lot attendant appears in the story's present; the garagemen are part of Mitty's memory and his plan to avoid embarrassment on future visits to the garage.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lieutenant Berg – An officer in Mitty's naval-commander fantasy. He initially questions the orders of the Commander (Mitty's alter ego) but ultimately obeys.

Dr. Renshaw – The Mittys' family doctor. After Mrs. Mitty suggests that Walter Mitty see him for a checkup, Mitty imagines Dr. Renshaw desperately needs his help in the operating room and he (Mitty, as a doctor in his fantasy) has graciously saved the day.

Wellington McMillan – The patient from Mitty's operating-room fantasy. A powerful "millionaire banker and close personal friend of Roosevelt," his name matches that of the famous Wellington brand of rubber boot, thus personifying the overshoes that Mrs. Mitty forces her real-life husband to buy.

Dr. Benbow – A second local doctor from the operating-room fantasy. "Dr. Mitty" notes that he drinks.

Dr. Remington – A specialist from New York in the operating-room fantasy.

Dr. Pritchard-Mitford – A specialist from London in the operating-room fantasy.

Gregory Fitzhurst – The man Walter Mitty is accused of killing in the courtroom fantasy.

Sergeant – "Captain Mitty's" deferential and admiring subordinate in the fighter-pilot fantasy.

Young Raleigh – Captain Mitty's copilot, who is unable to fly in the fighter-pilot fantasy.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

HEROISM AND MASCULINITY

As Walter Mitty ferries his wife to her hairdresser's and then buys some overshoes, he falls into fantasies that cast him in heroic and traditionally masculine roles: a naval commander, an expert pistol shot, a daring surgeon, a fighter pilot. He is admired for macho qualities like strength, bravery, aggression, lack of emotion, and holding his liquor, and is easily able to dominate the all-male social groups where his imagination makes him a leader. In real life, however, he shrinks from conflict and feels ridiculed by both men and women. His **car**, and his limited ability to control it—the fact that his wife limits the speed and that the garagemen must park it and work on it for him—symbolizes his sense of not being manly enough. In his unhappy marriage, Mrs. Mitty is the dominating personality, a balance of power that conflicts with traditional gender expectations and places him in the historically ridiculed position of the "henpecked husband." Mrs. Mitty's constant nagging and bossy behavior mark her as stereotypically unfeminine and unappealing, as well as insensitive. In contrast, the two women briefly featured in the fantasies, a "pretty nurse" and "a lovely dark-haired girl" who appears suddenly in Mitty's arms, are defined by their looks and serve mainly as props to help Mitty exercise his heroics.

While the Mittys' relationship dynamic helps to characterize them as individuals, it can also be seen as a comment on how suburban life and consumer culture minimize traditional masculinity. The story takes place on one of the couple's weekly trips to town for shopping and Mrs. Mitty's hair appointment—trips that Mitty hates because he is "always getting something wrong" on the shopping list and being scolded by Mrs. Mitty. In this way, while Mitty can fantasize about commanding masculine roles, his real circumstances place him—and the modern man he represents—in service to "feminine" concerns like appearance and household care. With doctors and garagemen around to take care of him, he has no opportunity nor any need to carry out heroic actions. And with traffic lights and parking garages governing his movements and Mrs. Mitty expecting him to drive her home, he has nowhere to escape but his imagination.

ILLNESS AND MORTALITY

Mrs. Mitty is preoccupied with her husband's health and possible illness ("You're not a young man any longer," she reminds him, insisting he put on the **gloves and overshoes** he doesn't want to wear) and uses her concern to dismiss his feelings and assert control over his behavior. When she catches Mitty in the middle of a fantasy, she suggests he see the doctor, and when he asserts his right to be "sometimes thinking," she declares she will take his temperature once she gets him home.

Mitty, whose age is part of his sense of weakness, resents these constant reminders of his mortality—in one fantasy scene, he is a surgeon who outperforms the very doctor his wife has told him to see. (The patient he saves is named Wellington, which also happens to be the name of a famous brand of rubber boots: not only is "Dr. Mitty" too healthy to need overshoes, but he can also restore overshoes themselves to health.) Yet, even so, death is always at the forefront of Mitty's "secret life": He defies death as a naval commander, stops death as a surgeon, deals death as a gunman, embraces the risk of death as a pilot, and finally, as a prisoner before a firing squad, dies

courageously. This changing relationship to death in the fantasies—with death evolving from something he can control and overcome to something that he can only face defiantly as it comes for him—parallels Mitty's initial resistance and ultimate resignation to his boring, unsatisfying life.

PUBLIC IMAGE AND EMBARRASSMENT

Walter Mitty is very anxious about how others perceive him: for instance, he is so fearful of the young garagemen's judgment that he plans to wear an unnecessary sling on his arm to avoid it, and he finds even the revolving doors of the hotel "faintly derisive." Most other characters, from Mrs. Mitty to the traffic cop to the woman who laughs at him for saying "puppy biscuit" aloud on the street, interact with Mitty only to criticize him, and he is frequently startled and flustered when their comments interrupt his fantasies. In contrast, his fantasies tend to include crowds of onlookers who marvel at his skill and bravery—such as the crew members who trust that "The Old Man'll get us through!" or the expert surgeons who look to him for help—and always present him as calm and collected in high-pressure situations. When his fantasy puts him on trial for his life, literalizing his sense of being judged by the parking garage attendant, Mitty undermines his own defense. Ironically, this repeats his real-life pattern of behavior (like forgetting to take his keys out of the car for the attendant), but it also shows his desire to be someone who does not fear public judgment.

THE OVERLAP OF FANTASY AND REALITY

While at first glance Walter Mitty's dramatic "secret life" couldn't be more different from his mundane, routine reality, there are connections between the two lives. A newsboy's shout about an ongoing trial triggers Mitty's courtroom fantasy, and reading about aerial warfare turns him into a fighter pilot. More broadly, the themes and events in the fantasies are directly linked to the frustrations Mitty feels in reality, particularly his sense of not being in control of his own life. Through his fantasies, Mitty can escape his wife's nagging reminders to drive slowly and see the doctor; he can tear through hurricanes and firestorms against all advice to the contrary, demanding obedience from sailors and surgeons. His imagination can transform him from a man who struggles with tire chains to one who can fix an "anaesthetizer" with a ballpoint pen. However, a turning point comes when, at the point in the courtroom fantasy when Mitty would be condemned, the word "cur" reminds him that the real Mitty needs to buy puppy biscuit—though his imagination can offer a temporary escape, he remains imprisoned in reality.

As the story progresses, the fantasy life and reality life blend together more and more: When Mitty goes to the store to buy the puppy biscuit, he is still self-identifying as "the greatest pistol shot in the world" as he wonders what brand of biscuit to buy. Similarly, in the final scene, Thurber transitions into Mitty's firing-squad fantasy without a paragraph break—a formal decision that shows just how much Mitty's two lives overlap in his mind. This sense of overlap is important for Mitty's character. He doesn't just dream of the exciting life he might have had; it's as if he truly lives the impossible adventures of his imagination, and this small but important distinction is what gives him at least a little bit of the strength and willpower he longs for. Mitty doesn't have much control over his life, but he does control his own interior world—he can prove his own worth, escape the confinements of his world, and be any kind of hero he wants to be, if only in his mind.

CONCEALMENT

The real-life Walter Mitty keeps his true self hidden, literally and figuratively. Whether he's reluctantly putting on **gloves and overshoes** in obedience to Mrs. Mitty's concern about his health, or planning to wear a sling on his arm to save himself from embarrassment, he believes concealing himself is necessary for his own protection; revealing his true self in any way would mean a risk of exposing his flaws. In his fantasies, however, Mitty is completely in control of what he conceals or reveals, and concealment is always an example of his strength. His heroic alter egos are calm and cool, expert at controlling their feelings—in particular, the enigmatic fighter pilot Captain Mitty remains self-possessed even while drinking. But Mitty won't accept any concealment imposed by others. In the courtroom fantasy, he refuses to use the sling as a disguise even when it could potentially save him from conviction: he wants everyone to know the truth about him and his abilities. His declaration, "To hell with the handkerchief!" in the final scene is similar—in declining a handkerchief blindfold, not only does he refuse to show fear before the firing squad, but he also refuses to conceal his face.

For "Walter Mitty the Undefeated, inscrutable to the last," this moment of pride and bravery is triumphant in spite of his death. Yet there's a sad irony to the fact that he remains "inscrutable"—that is, impossible for others to understand—up to the moment of his death, because this description applies to his real life as well as his fantasy. Just as his wife appears to be a stranger at the beginning, he will always be unknown and unknowable to her, and nobody will ever know what goes on in his secret life.

HUMOR

One of the most striking characteristics of Walter Mitty's fantasies is their silliness. The fantasies may be heroic, but only melodramatically, cartoonishly so; from the fountain pen Mitty uses to replace a piston to the

beautiful woman who materializes in his arms, they contain events and elements that couldn't possibly happen in reality, and read like exaggerated parodies of action movies or adventure stories. Like a child playing pretend, Mitty makes a pocketa-pocketa-pocketa sound effect for machines from airships to flamethrowers, and his vision of the machines is hazy beyond "complicated" dials and wires. His characters shout out nonsensical jargon: "Coreopsis is setting in," says the imaginary Dr. Renshaw, giving the surgical patient's condition the name of a daisylike flower. In some ways, Thurber's humor undermines Mitty even further; he is so pathetically far from having the skills he dreams of excelling in that his fantasies don't even make sense. Yet the real Mitty is also capable of wordplay—"toothbrush, bicarbonate, carborundum, initiative and referendum?" he muses at one point, free-associating with the items on his shopping list—and his real life can be darkly ridiculous too ("Don't tell me you forgot the what's-it's-name," Mrs. Mitty will often say). For that matter, Mitty and his wife are such cartoons of the proverbial henpecked husband and nagging wife that their real selves are hardly more dimensional than the characters Mitty imagines, which means that a less tongue-in-cheek rendition of his macho fantasies could come off as self-pitying or misogynistic. Mitty's secret life is what gives him depth—and the lighthearted, humorous tone of his fantasies is what makes both sides of his character sympathetic.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

CAR

The real-life Walter Mitty's masculinity—or lack of it—is most often demonstrated through his interactions with his **car**. Fast cars are commonly associated with sex and virility, but Mrs. Mitty won't allow her husband to go fast. Just as her demands control his schedule while they are in town, she controls the car even when he is the one behind the wheel. Mitty's skill with the car when he's on his own is questionable, however. He gets the tire chains wound around the axles, hesitates too long at a traffic light, and struggles to get it into the right place at the parking lot, requiring younger, more capable men—of whom Mitty is deeply resentful—to handle the car for him. His display of masculine power is limited to racing the engine as an ineffectual rebuttal to Mrs. Mitty's nagging—just as his heroism is limited to fantasies that go nowhere in real life.

GLOVES, OVERSHOES, SLING, AND HANDKERCHIEF

These covering garments symbolize the fearful, shame-based self-concealment that characterizes Walter Mitty's everyday life. Since Mrs. Mitty insists that he wear the **gloves** and **overshoes** to protect his health now that he's "not a young man any longer," they act as badges of physical weakness, and also, arguably, of a paranoia against the weather to match Mitty's paranoia of strangers' judgment. While he puts up a halfhearted resistance to wearing them—his "I don't need overshoes" is as mild and easily overruled as his later comment, "Does it ever occur to you that I am sometimes thinking?"—he quickly gives in, and not only in obedience to his wife. In one telling moment, he takes off the gloves as soon as Mrs. Mitty leaves him alone, but guiltily pulls them on again when a cop scolds him for lingering at a traffic light, as if by taking off the gloves he has exposed himself to public judgment. The **sling** he imagines wearing to deceive the garagemen works the same way, proclaiming physical unfitness and thereby shielding Mitty from expectations he can't meet. In his fantasies, however, Mitty is strong and brave and has no need for concealment: he declines to use the sling as an alibi when he is a crack shot on trial for murder, and he rejects the **handkerchief** over his face as he stands before the firing squad, fearlessly refusing to hide his face from the executioners.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Perennial Classics edition of *The Thurber Carnival* published in 1999.

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty Quotes

"I'm not asking you, Lieutenant Berg," said the Commander. "Throw on the power lights! Rev her up to 8,500! We're going through!"

Related Characters: Walter Mitty (speaker), Lieutenant Berg

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

As the story begins, we're introduced to a powerful, confidently macho character, the "Commander." The Commander is almost a parody of rugged masculinity--he's so cocky, so willful, so brave, etc., that he seems almost

unreal.

As we'll quickly come to realize, the Commander is, in fact, unreal--he's just a projection of Walter Mitty's overactive imagination. Walter himself is a rather pathetic man, at least according to the standards of masculinity in American culture--so it's perhaps appropriate that when Walter imagines something, he fantasizes about being the most over-the-top masculine figure he could possibly be.

"Not so fast! You're driving too fast!" said Mrs. Mitty. "What are you driving so fast for?"

Related Characters: Mrs. Mitty (speaker), Walter Mitty

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we discover the truth about what we've just been reading. The "Commander" is indeed an imaginary character--a manifestation of Walter Mitty's imagination. In real life, Walter is driving a car, and his irritable wife is telling him to slow down. The passage describes the basic relationship between Walter and Mrs. Mitty: Walter is meek and submissive to his wife, and his wife often yells at him and tries to control his behavior. Both characters are like caricatures of the meek man and the nagging wife, so it makes sense that Walter slips so easy into other caricatures, like those of his almost farcically confident and masculine imaginary alter-egos.

The passage also explains *why* Walter imagines his elaborate fantasies. Instead of lashing out at his wife or changing his behavior, Walter takes refuge in his imagination--like a child, he uses his fantasies to "get back" at other people (i.e., Mrs. Mitty) without actually confronting them. In real life, Walter slows down the car, but in his fantasy, he goes "full speed ahead."

He looked at his wife, in the seat beside him, with shocked astonishment. She seemed grossly unfamiliar, like a strange woman who had yelled at him in a crowd.

Related Characters: Mrs. Mitty, Walter Mitty

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

Walter has just awoken from a vivid fantasy, in which he's been playing the role of a military Commander. Walter is a little dazed: he barely recognizes his own wife, Mrs. Mitty, because his imaginations has been so vivid.

We already knew that Walter retreated into fantasy when Mrs. Mitty was bullying him. But here, it becomes clear that Walter's fantasy life is more than just a conscious defense mechanism--Walter's fantasies are so rich and so vivid that he forgets why he started fantasizing in the first place! In general, Walter is both a highly relatable character (who hasn't daydreamed to get away from reality?) and a farcical, humorous figure who disappears into his imagination to an almost unrealistic degree. In real life, this would also be somewhat disturbing--he seems to be hallucinating while he's driving a car.

Walter Mitty drove on toward Waterbury in silence, the roaring of the SN202 through the worst storm in twenty years of Navy flying fading in the remote, intimate airways of his mind.

Related Characters: Walter Mitty

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

Walter slowly returns to reality, but his imagination continues to overlap with that reality. He's been fantasizing (hallucinating?) about being a military commander, but his wife's nagging temporarily snaps him out of it. Interestingly, it then takes Walter a while to forget his fantasy and focus on what's in front of him (the road, since he's driving!).

The passage reinforces the strength and vividness of Walter Mitty's fantasies--when he's fantasizing, his visions are so clear that he forgets where he is and what he's doing. Even after he's "woken up," it takes Walter some time (a decent chunk of this short story) to drift back to consciousness, and his fantasies and real-life actions continue to overlap (at least here he's driving something in both his imagination

and in reality).

"Remember to get those overshoes while I'm having my hair done," she said. "I don't need overshoes," said Mitty. She put her mirror back into her bag. "We've been all through that," she said, getting out of the car. "You're not a young man any longer." He raced the engine a little.

Related Characters: Mrs. Mitty (speaker), Walter Mitty

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 55-56

Explanation and Analysis

As Walter drops off his wife, she orders him to buy some overshoes for himself. Walter claims that he doesn't need overshoes (basically boots designed to protect regular shoes in cold, wet weather), but his wife shoots him down.

The passage further establishes the humorous, caricatural dynamic between Walter and Mrs. Mitty. Walter is a weak, weak-willed man, but he likes to believe that he's strong and masculine (he doesn't need special shoes). Mrs. Mitty emasculates Walter by emphasizing his fragility and weakness. In response, Walter offers a tiny bit of real-life rebellion—he "races the engine a little." This pathetic self-affirmation is then contrasted with Walter's supremely confident, assertive alter-egos in his fantasies.

A huge, complicated machine, connected to the operating table, with many tubes and wires, began at this moment to go pocketa-pocketa-pocketa.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

Walter here begins his second fantasy, about a complicated surgery he's monitoring. The fantasy begins with a free-association between Walter's reality--i.e., driving the car--and his fantasy (the surgery). Walter's impressions of the machine he's driving "dissolve" into a description of a "huge, complicated machine" used to monitor medical patients.

The passage is hilarious in the way it emphasizes Walter's childishness, and the farcical nature of his fantasies. Walter has never been anywhere near medical school; he has no idea how medical devices work, or what kind of techniques would be used in a hospital. In making even Walter's fantasies ridiculous, Thurber not only pokes fun at Walter, but also at escapist fictions that actually resemble such fantasies.

"I've read your book on streptothricosis," said Pritchard-Mitford, shaking hands. "A brilliant performance, sir." "Thank you," said Walter Mitty. "Didn't know you were in the States, Mitty," grumbled Remington. "Coals to Newcastle, bringing Mitford and me up here for a tertiary." "You are very kind," said Mitty.

Related Characters: Dr. Pritchard-Mitford, Dr. Remington, Walter Mitty (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

Walter Mitty's fantasy continues. He's stationed in the hospital, presiding over the medical procedures there. Mitty is a highly respected doctor in this fantasy, as evidenced by the way his colleagues, Remington and Pritchard-Mitford treat him.

The passage emphasizes Walter's lack of a strong male community: the fact that Walter *fantasizes* about getting approval from impressive male friends makes us pretty sure that he doesn't have many friends like this in real life. Furthermore, the passage humorously reinforces Walter's cluelessness about actual medical practices: the passage is full of nonsense phrases that sound like a layman's attempts to make sense of medical mumbo-jumbo.

The attendant vaulted into the car, backed it up with insolent skill, and put it where it belonged.

Related Characters: Parking-Lot Attendant and Grinning Garagemen

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Mitty has again been thrust back into reality. While he's been fantasizing about his own skill with nonsensical medical machines, Walter has bungled his parking job. A young attendant (not much older than a teenager) has to take Walter's place and drive Walter's car into the correct parking space. Thurber describes the attendant as driving with "insolent skill," emphasizing Walter's humiliation: Walter's been dreaming about operating complicated machines, but clearly doesn't even know how to handle a fairly basic one, his car.

The passage subtly emphasizes the divide between Walter and other men. Cars are a classic American symbol of masculinity: to be a good driver or able to work with cars is to be cool, courageous, rugged, and generally a paragon of male virtue. Walter's age and clumsiness make him bad at driving and, implicitly, a lesser man--unlike the confident, "insolent" attendant described here.

The next time, he thought, I'll wear my right arm in a sling; they won't grin at me then. I'll have my right arm in a sling and they'll see I couldn't possibly take the chains off myself.

Related Characters: Walter Mitty (speaker), Parking-Lot Attendant and Grinning Garagemen

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Walter Mitty has a hard time with cars. He's tried to remove the chains from his tires before, and bungled the job--as a result, Mrs. Mitty forces him to go to the garage whenever he wants to remove the chains. Mitty resents having to rely on other people to take care of his car, as he knows that being able to take care of one's car is a sign of power and masculinity -- and the garage workers seem to know it to, as they "grin" at him when he takes his car in.

But because Walter knows he can never prove himself to other men through skill or confidence, he tries another tactic. Instead of trying to elicit wonder from other people, he tries to elicit sympathy by placing his arm in a sling. Notice, though, that Walter doesn't actually place his arm in the sling: even here, he relies on fantasy and imagination to solve his problems.

In a way he hated these weekly trips to town—he was always getting something wrong. Kleenex, he thought, Squibb's, razor blades? No. Toothpaste, toothbrush, bicarbonate, carborundum, initiative and referendum? He gave it up. But she would remember it. "Where's the what's-its-name?" she would ask. "Don't tell me you forgot the what's its name."

Related Characters: Walter Mitty, Mrs. Mitty

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Walter Mitty mourns his inability to remember what to buy at the store. Mrs. Mitty sends him on errands to the store to buy groceries, but Walter is so forgetful (his mind wanders, we've noticed!) that he always forgets a couple items. Mitty remembers the way his wife scorns his forgetfulness: she asks him if he's remembered the "what's its name." (Even in his memory, he can't remember the item.)

Again we see the overlap of reality and fantasy here, as Walter is trying to *imagine* Mrs. Mitty criticizing him. He's not acting as a masculine, confident hero in this fantasy, but as himself--and he's still making up fancy words and letting his imagination run wild. Walter isn't as pathetic as he seems, just his skills (his active imagination) don't seem very "useful" to the people around him.

Walter Mitty raised his hand briefly and the bickering attorneys were stilled. "With any known make of gun," he said evenly, "I could have killed Gregory Fitzhurst at three hundred feet *with my left hand*."

Related Characters: Walter Mitty, Gregory Fitzhurst

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we enter Walter's third fantasy. Notice how each fantasy gets a little more pessimistic than the one before: at first, Walter was a calm, courageous commander, but here, he's on trial for his life. Walter imagines himself being accused of murder. Instead of denying the crime, Walter calmly boasts of his ability to kill any man, even with his arm in a sling.

The passage is interested because it suggests the way Walter is at odds with himself. Walter wants to wear his arm in a sling in order to draw pity from others, but he also wants to be perceived as strong and dangerous, as he makes very clear here (and in his fantasy, then, the sling becomes a sign of heroism, not feebleness). Walter doesn't know what he wants: he's both narcissistic and rather masochistic. Perhaps more than anything else, he just wants to be taken seriously, whether for his heroism, his intelligence, his competence, or his dangerousness.

"Puppy biscuit," said Walter Mitty. He stopped walking and the buildings of Waterbury rose up out of the misty courtroom and surrounded him again.

Related Characters: Walter Mitty

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

Thus far, Walter has often jumped into fantasy after receiving some real-world stimulus; for example, he began fantasizing about driving a huge plane while he was driving in the car. In this passage, however, the process works in reverse: Walter is in the middle of a fantasy, when he's suddenly reminded of the item he was supposed to buy at the store (puppy biscuits).

The passage uses a familiar comic device, bathos (the sudden shifting of tones--here, the dramatic to the trivial), emphasizing the humor and the way Walter's daydreams aren't quite as divorced from reality as he might like them to be--he can't ever escape for more than a few minutes at a time. Sooner or later, puppy biscuits pull him down to earth.

"I want some biscuit for small, young dogs," he said to the clerk. "Any special brand, sir?" The greatest pistol shot in the world thought a moment. "It says 'Puppies Bark for It' on the box," said Walter Mitty.

Related Characters: Walter Mitty (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Walter goes to the store and asks the clerk for help buying dog biscuits. Even for this mundane task, Walter finds himself utterly incapable of doing things himself--he has to ask a clerk for help tracking down the appropriate brand of biscuit. He also seems unwilling to say the word "puppy," because he was just laughed at for saying it aloud--so instead he goes for the awkward "small, young dogs." At every stage in his life, Walter relies on other people--a sure sign of his emasculation. (The fact that he's doing the grocery shopping, a stereotypically feminine activity, further emphasizes this.)

Notice that Thurber refers to Walter as a great pistol shot, a sarcastic reference to Water's last fantasy, in which he casts himself as a dangerous shooter. Once again Walter's fantasy life and reality blend in a more intimate way. In his imagination, he never truly escapes reality (puppy biscuit), and in reality he never truly lets go of his fantasy (here he's the greatest pistol shot in the world).

"I never see a man could hold his brandy like you, sir," said the sergeant. "Begging your pardon, sir." Captain Mitty stood up and strapped on his huge Webley-Vickers automatic.

Related Characters: Walter Mitty, Sergeant (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Walter begins his next vivid fantasy. In this one, Walter casts himself as a stern, stoic pilot, flying into great danger. Before he goes off (possibly to his death), "Captain Mitty" has a couple shots of brandy.

Being able to hold one's liquor is a classic sign of masculinity--"real men," it's said, can drink a lot and still be calm and cool. Walter is perfectly aware of *how* to appear

masculine in real life--he just lacks the talent or physical prowess to do so. So he daydreams about seeming like a "big man"; an exaggerated form of fantasy is the best he can do.

"It's forty kilometers through hell, sir," said the sergeant. Mitty finished one last brandy. "After all," he said softly, "what isn't?"

Related Characters: Sergeant, Walter Mitty (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

Walter continues to fantasize about a world in which he's a fighter pilot flying into danger. Walter the captain drinks more brandy before he goes off to fly--drinking being a sure sign of sophistication and masculinity. Walter further reinforces his stoic masculinity (at least in the fantasy!) with his response that "40 kilometers through hell" seems like an experience he's familiar with.

Walter's pronouncement is basically nonsensical--he's trying to say that everything in life is a life-or-death struggle (which is just plain untrue). Walter's words sound like a cartoonish exaggeration of the rugged individualist who appears in your average Hemingway story, or the kind of character played by actors like Humphrey Bogart or Gary Cooper. In other words, Walter has seen enough movies and read enough books to know, more or less, how to sound like a "real man"--and in this way, Thurber lampoons these macho stories as well.

"I was thinking," said Walter Mitty. "Does it ever occur to you that I am sometimes thinking?" She looked at him. "I'm going to take your temperature when I get you home," she said.

Related Characters: Mrs. Mitty, Walter Mitty (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Walter Mitty comes close--as close as he ever gets in the story--to responding directly and asserting himself to his wife, Mrs. Mitty. Mrs. Mitty criticizes her husband for his constant daydreaming, and Walter mutters something about how he's "thinking." Walter knows that it's wrong to spend so much time immersed in fantasy, and wants to justify himself to his wife. But he lacks the courage or the confidence to stand up to Mrs. Mitty and go further with this statement. As a result, Mrs. Mitty further dismisses Walter's individuality and adulthood by suggesting that his behavior is just a medical problem.

Notice also that Mrs. Mitty says that she's going to "get" Walter home--despite the fact that Walter has been doing the driving throughout the story, Mrs. Mitty is clearly the one in control. By suggesting that Walter is sick, Mrs. Mitty implies that even Walter's meager attempt to stand up to her is just a "lapse" on his part. Her domination over Walter seems almost total.

They went out through the revolving doors that made a faintly derisive whistling sound when you pushed them.

Related Characters: Walter Mitty, Mrs. Mitty (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

In this cleverly detailed passage, Walter and his wife leave the building and prepare to return to their home. As they exit, they go through a revolving door.

Note that a revolving door makes a big, dramatic entrance impossible--you can't "burst" through a revolving door, as Walter the armchair adventurer would like to do. One could even say that revolving doors are another symbol of emasculation: in modern society, there are no opportunities for showing off one's masculinity and courage, as even walking through a door is a slow, shuffling process. Thurber underscores the pathetic nature of Walter's exit by describing the "derisive" sound of the revolving door--he's so anxious and unconfident that he imagines even the doors mocking him.

"To hell with the handkerchief," said Walter Mitty scornfully. He took one last drag on his cigarette and snapped it away. 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.

Related Characters: Walter Mitty (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

In Walter's last and grimmest fantasy, he's being executed before a firing squad--a symbol of the way his wife has lashed out at him for daring to express his own individuality. Even in his daydreams, he's about to die--although still in a macho, confident way.

Why does Walter dream about being shot? Perhaps Thurber wants to suggest that Walter's emasculation is partly Walter's own fault: on some level, he seems to enjoy the way his wife needles him. In another sense, Walter's fantasy shows how pathetic his life has become: even to be executed with dignity is a vacation from the mundanity of his everyday existence. In his fantasy, Walter bravely shows his face to the firing squad, eschewing the customary handkerchief that's given to prisoners before they're shot. Walter *wants* to assert his bravery and freedom, but he's not really brave enough to do so in the real world.

And yet there's a slightly poetic turn at the end of this passage: "inscrutable to the last." Part of Walter's core self is his vivid imagination, and his concealment of that imagination from all other people. He is inscrutable to the outside world, or certainly to his wife, and so despite his seemingly mundane and pathetic existence, his "secret life" and its "inscrutability" make him in a way a romantic, if tragic, figure.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE SECRET LIFE OF WALTER MITTY

A naval commander is captaining a "huge, hurtling, eight-engined Navy hydroplane" through a terrible storm. Physical descriptions associate him with cold and ice.

The Commander is the only one of Mitty's alter egos not to share his name. This distances him from the real Mitty and emphasizes his commanding role—the exact opposite of the meek and passive role Mitty plays in his own life. It also allows the story to start off mid-fantasy without tipping its hand that it is *mid-fantasy.*

Though his lieutenant fears he can't make it, the Commander insists on full speed ahead, and the admiring crew expresses its faith in his abilities.

The Commander's power and heroism are shown not only in his daring actions, but also in his ability to overrule others' objections and inspire their admiration (even if the generic commands he shouts don't make much sense).

Mrs. Mitty calls out a warning not to drive so fast, and it is revealed that the naval commander was part of a fantasy Walter Mitty has been having as he drives his **car.**

Symbolically, Mrs. Mitty 's limit on the speed is a limit on both Mitty's independence and his masculinity, and immediately contrasts with Mitty's fantasy of the Commander ordering full speed ahead. Humor comes from the ironic juxtaposition of the fantasy and the reality.

For a moment, Mitty does not recognize his wife. She seems "grossly unfamiliar, like a strange woman who had yelled at him in a crowd." As his fantasy fades, Mrs. Mitty suggests that he see Dr. Renshaw for a checkup.

Mitty and his wife understand each other so little that they really could be strangers. Her assumption that whatever is bothering Walter must be physical illness shows her insensitivity to his psychological needs.

Walter Mitty drops Mrs. Mitty off at the hair salon. As she gets out of the **car**, she reminds him to buy a pair of **overshoes**, cutting off his protest that he doesn't need them by saying, "You're not a young man any longer." Mitty races the car engine a little.

Both Mrs. Mitty's nagging and his own age prevent Mitty from doing what he wants. Racing the car engine is an outlet for his frustration and yet, also, a humorously ineffective attempt to prove his virility, as it doesn't actually make the car go anywhere.

Mitty puts on his **gloves** when his wife asks why he isn't wearing them, but takes them off as soon as she has gotten out of the car and he is stopped at a red light, out of sight. When the light changes, a cop snaps at him to hurry, and Mitty puts the gloves back on before he drives away.

Hypersensitive to the cop's criticism, Mitty acts as if taking off the gloves—following his own judgment and in doing so revealing himself literally and figuratively—is the real transgression. He responds to shame by concealing himself, putting the gloves back on.

When he drives past the hospital, Mitty falls into another fantasy. A famous millionaire, Wellington McMillan, is suffering from "obstreosis of the ductal tract," and the four doctors performing his surgery—including Dr. Renshaw and two visiting specialists—need Mitty's help.

Elements from Mitty's real life—including the overshoes, to which the millionaire's name alludes; Wellington's are a famous brand of rubber boots—appear in his fantasy. Nonsense medical jargon adds to the humor of the scene and shows just how much of a fantasy Mitty's fantasy is.

Mitty meets the two specialists and graciously accepts their compliments. Suddenly, a "complicated machine" attached to the operating table breaks down. While an interne panics, Mitty calmly and quickly fixes the machine by replacing a faulty piston with a fountain pen. Then, "coreopsis" sets in on the patient, and Dr. Renshaw nervously asks Mitty to take over.

The compliments in the fantasy counteract Mitty's real-life sense of shame. Mitty regains power over the overshoes and Dr. Renshaw, and by extension his wife, by providing health and strength they do not have. However, his heroic acts are laughably unrealistic.

Before Mitty can make his first cut, a shout from the parking-lot attendant interrupts the fantasy: Mitty has driven into the exit-only lane. Dazed, he tries to correct his mistake, but the attendant takes over, re-parking the **car** "with insolent skill."

Mitty is again embarrassed and publicly corrected by a stranger. In contrast to "Dr. Mitty's" skill with tools and machines, he feels impotent when handling the car and takes the young attendant's skill as a personal insult.

As he walks along Main Street, Walter Mitty remembers another incident in which he had tried to remove his **car's** tire chains, only to end up with them wound around the axles, and another "young, grinning garageman" had to come and help him. Ever since, Mrs. Mitty has made him drive to a garage whenever the chains need changing.

Mitty assumes the young men are judging him. He resents them as examples of the masculine skills and qualities he thinks he should have but doesn't—a feeling exacerbated by his wife's assumption of his inability to handle the task of putting chains on the tire.

Mitty plans to wear his right arm in a sling the next time he goes to a garage, so that the garageman will see that he couldn't have taken the chains off himself and will not grin at him. He kicks resentfully at the slush on the sidewalk, which reminds him to buy **overshoes.**

Mitty's sling-wearing plan is a form of shame-based self-concealment. Along with his decision to buy the overshoes a moment later, this solution suggests he has internalized his wife's beliefs about his physical infirmity.

After buying the overshoes, Mitty has trouble remembering what else Mrs. Mitty told him to buy. She often scolds him for getting something wrong in the shopping list—even if she herself can't remember the name of the item.

Mitty's subordination to his wife and her shopping list suggests the emasculation of the modern suburban man. Humor comes from the irony of Mrs. Mitty's complaints about his memory when she also can't remember the same things.

Hearing a newsboy shouting something about a trial, Mitty has a fantasy in which he is on trial for murder. When his attorney claims that he could not have committed the crime because his arm was in a sling, Mitty announces that he could have made the shot that killed the victim even with his left hand.

The trial scene makes literal Mitty's sense of being judged by the garagemen. Here, however, Mitty rejects the sling as an alibi: his manly heroism transcends illness and injury, and he will not conceal the truth about himself (which in the case of the fantasy is that he is so skilled a shot that not even an injury to his good hand can hamper him). The scene also marks the beginning of a trend toward darker fantasies.

As chaos breaks out in the courtroom, a beautiful woman appears in Mitty's arms, and the District Attorney attacks her. Mitty punches him, calling him a "miserable cur"…

The beautiful "damsel in distress" hints at fantasy-Mitty's sexual prowess and provides an opportunity for heroism, while her sudden appearance out of nowhere pokes fun at heroic conventions and at Mitty himself.

…which reminds him that he was supposed to buy puppy biscuit. A passing woman laughs at Mitty for saying "Puppy biscuit" aloud to himself.

Here Mitty's fantasy reminds him of reality, meaning his imagination offers only a limited escape from his circumstances—not only do his experiences in reality fuel his fantasies, but events in his fantasies push him back out into reality. He is again embarrassed by a stranger, this time a woman, whose laughter at him directly contrasts the appearance of the beautiful woman in the fantasy.

Though Mitty is already near a grocery store, he is embarrassed by the woman's laughter and goes out of his way to a smaller store further up the street. As he speaks to the clerk, requesting "some biscuit for small, young dogs," he continues to think of himself as "the greatest pistol shot in the world."

Mitty's embarrassment leads him to hide by going to a smaller store, and also to change his language. Buying puppy biscuit is an amusingly benign activity for a daring and dangerous hero, and the overlap of Mitty's realities again suggests a kind of domestication or neutralization of Mitty's would-be manhood.

Mitty makes sure to arrive first at the hotel where he will meet Mrs. Mitty after her hairstyling appointment, because she doesn't like to get there before him. While he's waiting at the hotel, he sees a magazine headline about whether Germany's air force can conquer the world and imagines himself as Captain Mitty, a British fighter pilot.

Mitty's choice to sink down in a chair that faces the window is part of his tendency to conceal himself (his wife will later complain about it). His sense of duty in obeying his wife's not-always-reasonable commands can be compared to the dutiful behavior of the pilot.

Mitty's copilot is unable to fly, and so Mitty volunteers to fly alone. A young, deferential sergeant describes the danger of the mission and advises Mitty not to go.

However, when the pilot follows his sense of duty, it's an example of his strength of character and bravery in ignoring the sergeant's more cautious advice.

With bombs falling and machine guns, cannons, and flamethrowers firing nearby, Mitty drinks several shots of brandy (to the sergeant's admiration) and speaks carelessly about the possibility of death.

The hyperbolic violence of the war zone is a funny contrast to Mitty's supremely calm demeanor. In the fantasy, his ability to contain and conceal both his feelings and his liquor is part of what proves him a hero.

Just as Captain Mitty is leaving the dugout to get into the plane, Mrs. Mitty arrives at the hotel and scolds her husband for sitting in a hard-to-find spot and for not putting on his overshoes yet. In a rare moment of defending himself, Mitty asks, "Does it ever occur to you that I am sometimes thinking?" Mrs. Mitty says she will take his temperature once she gets him home.

Once again, Mrs. Mitty dismisses Walter's individuality by suggesting that his inner life is only a medical problem—another way he remains concealed from her. Her phrasing "when I get you home" also detracts from his sense of agency and control.

When Walter Mitty and Mrs. Mitty leave the hotel, the revolving doors make "a faintly derisive whistling sound." On the way back to the **car**, Mrs. Mitty asks her husband to wait while she buys something at a drugstore. As rain and sleet begin to fall, Mitty lights a cigarette, stands against the wall, and imagines he is standing before a firing squad.

Mitty perceives his whole environment as critical of him, though it is also noteworthy that a revolving door – which you can't burst through, like you can with a normal door – is a sort of domesticating invention. The rain and sleet add to the gloominess of the setting and link back to the description of the Commander in the opening scene. They also present Mrs. Mitty as inconsiderate, since her concern about Mitty's health doesn't prevent her from keeping him waiting in the cold.

Scornfully saying, "To hell with the handkerchief," Mitty bravely and proudly faces his imaginary death, describing himself as "Walter Mitty the Undefeated, inscrutable to the last."

Mitty's refusal to conceal his face shows both his bravery and his lack of shame. However, his true self remains concealed, both in real life and in the fantasy. And note also the trajectory of the fantasies, as fantasy-Mitty has continued to maintain a cool, calm demeanor but has gone from leading his crew to escape death in the first fantasy to, here, facing certain death. While fantasy-Mitty remains a hero, the degree of his control over events has diminished, just as through the course of the day Mitty himself finds himself ever further under the control of his wife.

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