

## Character

# The Secret Life of Walter Mitty

James Thurber

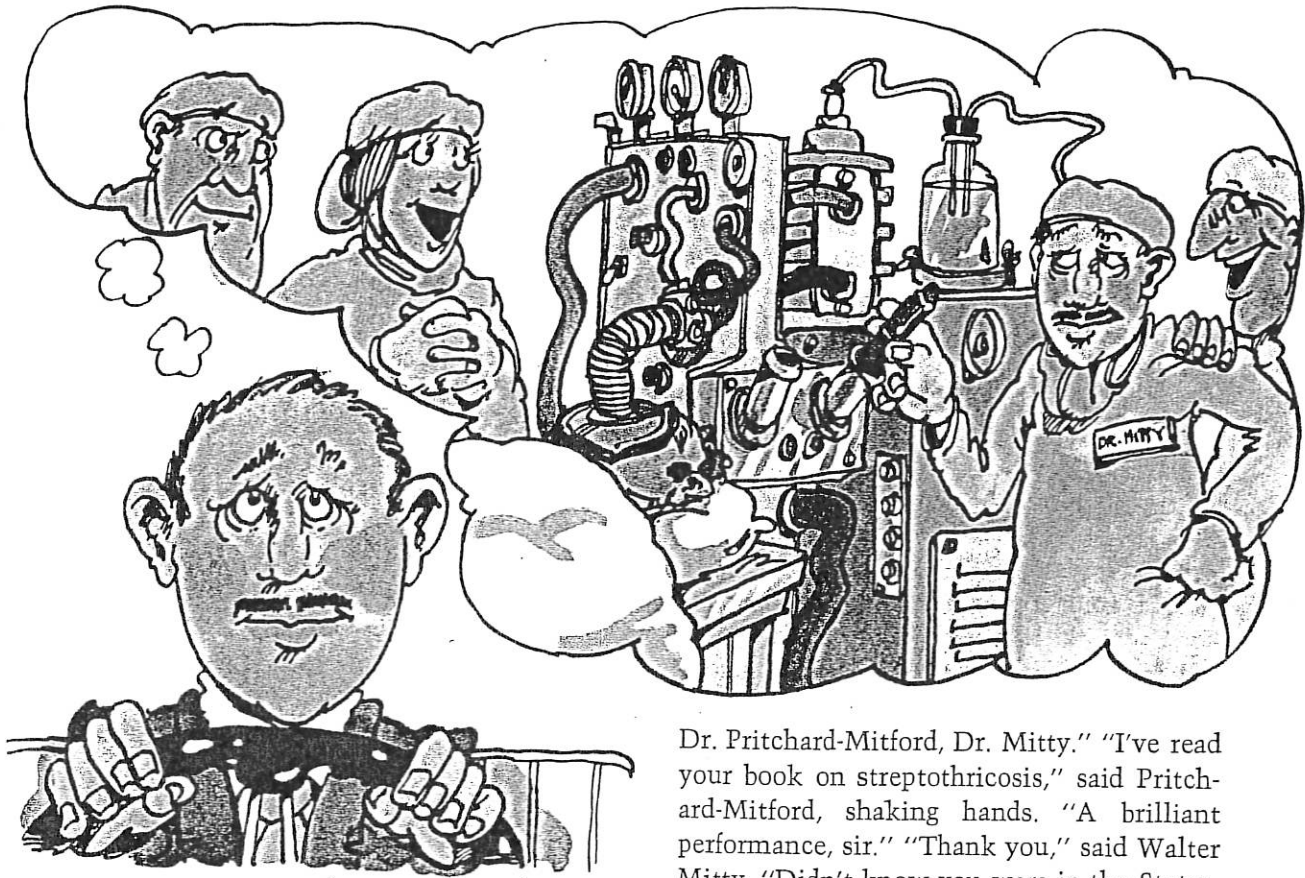
"We're going through!" The Commander's voice was like thin ice breaking. He wore his full-dress uniform, with the heavily braided white cap pulled down rakishly over one cold gray eye. "We can't make it, sir. It's spoiling for a hurricane, if you ask me." "I'm not asking you, Lieutenant Berg," said the Commander. "Throw on the power lights! Rev her up to 8,500! We're going through!" The pounding of the cylinders increased: ta-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa. The Commander stared at the ice forming on the pilot window. He walked over and twisted a row of complicated dials. "Switch on No. 8 auxiliary!" he shouted. "Switch on No. 8 auxiliary!" repeated Lieutenant Berg. "Full strength in No. 3 turret!" shouted the Commander. "Full strength in No. 3 turret!" The crew, bending to their various tasks in the huge, hurtling eight-engined Navy hydroplane, looked at each other and grinned. "The Old Man'll get us through," they said to one another. "The Old Man ain't afraid of Hell!" . . .

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

"Hmm?" said Walter Mitty. 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. "You were up to fifty-five," she said. "You know I don't like to go more than forty. You were up to fifty-five." 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. "You're tensed up again," said Mrs. Mitty. "It's one of your days. I wish you'd let Dr. Renshaw look you over."

Walter Mitty stopped the car in front of the building where his wife went to have her hair done. "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. "Why don't you wear your gloves? Have you lost your gloves?" Walter Mitty reached in a pocket and brought out the gloves. He put them on, but after she had turned and gone into the building and he had driven on to a red light, he took them off again. "Pick it up, brother!" snapped a cop as the light changed, and Mitty hastily pulled on his gloves and lurched ahead. He drove



around the streets aimlessly for a time, and then he drove past the hospital on his way to the parking lot.

... "It's the millionaire banker, Wellington McMillan," said the pretty nurse. "Yes?" said Walter Mitty, removing his gloves slowly. "Who has the case?" "Dr. Renshaw and Dr. Benbow, but there are two specialists here, Dr. Remington from New York and Dr. Pritchard-Mitford from London. He flew over!" A door opened down a long cool corridor and Dr. Renshaw came out. He looked distraught and haggard. "Hello, Mitty," he said. "We're having the devil's own time with McMillan, the millionaire banker and close personal friend of Roosevelt. Obstreosis of the ductal tract. Tertiary. Wish you'd take a look at him." "Glad to," said Mitty.

In the operating room there were whispered introductions: "Dr. Remington, Dr. Mitty.

Dr. Pritchard-Mitford, Dr. Mitty." "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,<sup>1</sup> bringing Mitford and me up here for a tertiary." "You are very kind," said Mitty. A huge, complicated machine, connected to the operating table, with many tubes and wires, began at this moment to go pocketa-pocketa-pocketa. "The new anesthetic is giving way!" shouted an intern. "There is no one in the East who knows how to fix it!" "Quiet, man!" said Mitty, in a low, cool voice. He sprang to the machine, which was now going pocketa-pocketa-queep-pocketa-queep. He began fingering delicately a row of glistening dials. "Give me a fountain pen!" he snapped. Someone handed him a fountain pen. He pulled a faulty piston out of

1. Coals to Newcastle: a saying used to indicate unnecessary labor. Newcastle, a city in England, is famous for its production of coal.

the machine and inserted the pen in its place. "That will hold for ten minutes," he said. "Get on with the operation." A nurse hurried over and whispered to Renshaw, and Mitty saw the man turn pale. "Coreopsis has set in," said Renshaw nervously. "If you would take over, Mitty?" Mitty looked at him and at the craven figure of Benbow, who drank, and at the grave, uncertain faces of the two great specialists. "If you wish," he said. They slipped a white gown on him; he adjusted a mask and drew on thin gloves; nurses handed him shining . . .

"Back it up, Mac! Look out for that Buick!" Walter Mitty jammed on the brakes. "Wrong lane, Mac," said the parking-lot attendant, looking at Mitty closely. "Gee. Yeh," muttered Mitty. He began cautiously to back out of the lane marked "Exit Only." "Leave her sit there," said the attendant. "I'll put her away." Mitty got out of the car. "Hey, better leave the key." "Oh," said Mitty, handing the man the ignition key. The attendant vaulted into the car, backed it up with insolent skill, and put it where it belonged.

They're so cocky, thought Walter Mitty, walking along Main Street; they think they know everything. Once he had tried to take his chains off, outside New Milford, and he had got them wound around the axles. A man had had to come out in a wrecking car and unwind them, a young, grinning garageman. Since then Mrs. Mitty always made him drive to a garage to have the chains taken off. 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. He kicked at the slush on the sidewalk. "Overshoes," he said to himself, and he began looking for a shoe store.

When he came out into the street again, with the overshoes in a box under his arm,

Walter Mitty began to wonder what the other thing was his wife had told him to get. She had told him twice before they set out from their house for Waterbury. 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." A newsboy went by shouting something about the Waterbury trial.

. . . "Perhaps this will refresh your memory." The District Attorney suddenly thrust a heavy automatic at the quiet figure on the witness stand. "Have you ever seen this before?" Walter Mitty took the gun and examined it expertly. "This is my Webley-Vickers 50.80," he said calmly. An excited buzz ran around the courtroom. The Judge rapped for order. "You are a crack shot with any sort of firearms, I believe?" said the District Attorney, insinuatingly. "Objection!" shouted Mitty's attorney. "We have shown that the defendant could not have fired the shot. We have shown that he wore his right arm in a sling on the night of the fourteenth of July." 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.*" Pandemonium broke loose in the courtroom. A woman's scream rose above the bedlam and suddenly a lovely, dark-haired girl was in Walter

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2. *carborundum, initiative and referendum*: Carborundum is a hard, abrasive material. Initiative refers to the right of citizens to introduce new legislation. Referendum refers to the right of citizens to vote directly on laws. The association in Mitty's mind is one of sound, not of sense.

Mitty's arms. The District Attorney struck at her savagely. Without rising from his chair, Mitty let the man have it on the point of the chin. "You miserable cur!" . . .

"Puppy biscuit," said Walter Mitty. He stopped walking and the buildings of Waterbury rose up out of the misty courtroom and surrounded him again. A woman who was passing laughed. "He said 'Puppy biscuit,'" she said to her companion. "That man said 'Puppy biscuit' to himself." Walter Mitty hurried on. He went into an A & P, not the first one he came to but a smaller one farther up the street. "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.

His wife would be through at the hairdresser's in fifteen minutes, Mitty saw in looking at his watch, unless they had trouble drying it; sometimes they had trouble drying it. She didn't like to get to the hotel first; she would want him to be there waiting for her as usual. He found a big leather chair in the lobby, facing a window, and he put the overshoes and the puppy biscuit on the floor beside it. He picked up an old copy of *Liberty* and sank down into the chair. "Can Germany Conquer the World Through the Air?" Walter Mitty looked at the pictures of bombing planes and of ruined streets.

. . . "The cannonading has got the wind up in young Raleigh, sir," said the sergeant. Captain Mitty looked up at him through tousled hair. "Get him to bed," he said wearily, "with the others. I'll fly alone." "But you can't, sir," said the sergeant anxiously. "It takes two men to handle that bomber and the Archies<sup>3</sup>

3. **Archies:** allied troops' name for the antiaircraft guns in World War I.



are pounding hell out of the air. Von Richtman's circus<sup>4</sup> is between here and Saulier." "Somebody's got to get that ammunition dump," said Mitty. "I'm going over. Spot of brandy?" He poured a drink for the sergeant and one for himself. War thundered and whined around the dugout and battered at the door. There was a rending of wood and splinters flew through the room. "A bit of a near thing," said Captain Mitty carelessly. "The box barrage is closing in," said the sergeant. "We only live once, Sergeant," said Mitty, with his faint, fleeting smile. "Or do we?" He poured another brandy and tossed it off. "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. "It's forty kilometers through hell, sir," said the sergeant. Mitty finished one last

4. **circus:** here, a squadron of planes flying in close formation.





brandy. "After all," he said softly, "what isn't?" The pounding of the cannon increased; there was the rat-tat-tatting of machine guns, and from somewhere came the menacing pocketa-pocketa-pocketa of the new flame-throwers. Walter Mitty walked to the door of the dugout humming "Auprès de Ma Blonde."<sup>5</sup> He turned and waved to the sergeant. "Cheerio!" he said. . . .

Something struck his shoulder. "I've been looking all over this hotel for you," said Mrs. Mitty. "Why do you have to hide in this old chair? How did you expect me to find you?" "Things close in," said Walter Mitty vaguely. "What?" Mrs. Mitty said. "Did you get the what's-its-name? The puppy biscuit? What's in that box?" "Overshoes," said Mitty. "Couldn't you have put them on in the store?" "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.

They went out through the revolving doors that made a faintly derisive whistling sound when you pushed them. It was two blocks to the parking lot. At the drugstore on the corner she said, "Wait here for me. I forgot something. I won't be a minute." She was more than a minute. Walter Mitty lighted a cigarette. It began to rain, rain with sleet in it. He stood up against the wall of the drugstore, smoking. . . . He put his shoulders back and his heels together. "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<sup>6</sup> to the last.

5. "Auprès de Ma Blonde": popular French song.

6. inscrutable: unknowable, mysterious.

## FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

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1. Contrast Walter Mitty's real life with his secret life. Why does he feel the need to escape from real life?
  2. Each of Mitty's daydreams is sparked by some detail of everyday life. For example, Mitty drives past a hospital and imagines himself a famous doctor. Explain how his other daydreams grow out of actual events.
  3. What kind of person is Mrs. Mitty?
  4. The final incident of the story shows Walter Mitty dreaming of himself before a firing squad. How is this incident symbolic of his view of himself? Is this final daydream of Walter Mitty's an adequate summing-up of the total effect of the story? Why or why not?
  5. Readers have found "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" both funny and sad. How is it funny and how is it sad?

## DIRECT AND INDIRECT CHARACTERIZATION

A writer can develop and reveal character in a number of ways: (1) through a physical description of the character; (2) through the character's actions; (3) through the character's thoughts, feelings, and speeches; (4) through the comments and reactions of other characters; (5) through direct statements giving the writer's opinion of the character. The first four methods are *indirect* methods of characterization; they *show* or *dramatize* character. The last method is *direct* characterization; it *tells* rather than dramatizes. Within a single passage, an author may use both direct and indirect methods of characterization.

James Thurber uses three of these methods of characterization to develop Walter Mitty. Tell which methods he uses and give examples of their use.

## DRAMATIC IRONY

Irony contrasts what is real with what only seems to be real. A writer may say one thing and mean quite another. This kind of irony, which was discussed on page 24, is called *verbal irony*. Another kind of irony is *dramatic irony*. In dramatic irony, the contrast depends upon the difference between what a character believes and what readers know is true. For example, Mitty has a fantasy about being a flying ace, but the reader knows from Mitty's inept behavior in the parking lot that he has trouble just parking his car.

Find other examples of dramatic irony in "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty." How do the ironic contrasts in this story deepen your understanding of Mitty as a character?

## LANGUAGE AND VOCABULARY

### Recognizing Mock-Jargon

*Jargon* usually refers to the special language of a group of people, especially people in the same job. Engineers have their jargon, as do doctors, lawyers, and carpenters. Often, such language is necessary to communicate complex or technical ideas. But sometimes, special language is used simply to impress outsiders, to show that writers or speakers know more than their readers or listeners. Language used for this purpose fits another definition of jargon—"incomprehensible speech."

"The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" pokes fun at the jargon of several groups. Find examples of the mock-jargon of doctors. Can you find other examples of mock-jargon? What are they?

## FOR COMPOSITION

### Writing a Sequel to the Story

Write a sequel to "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty." Let Mitty have one more daydream of glory. Show how a detail of everyday life sparks his daydream. At the end of your story, show how his daydream is rudely interrupted.

Or, if you like, write a short, short story about another character who lives a double life—an everyday life and a secret life. Show why your character needs a secret life. Keep in mind that *showing* is a more effective way of developing a character than telling is.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Thurber (1894-1961) achieved success as both a writer and a cartoonist. He is one of America's most highly regarded humorists. Part of his success lies in his gift for being funny and serious at the same time. His writings and drawings are populated by men and women who attempt to cope with one another and with modern life, and by puzzled, compassionate dogs who quietly observe the human scene.

Thurber grew up in Columbus, Ohio, and attended Ohio State University. Later he wrote about these early years in the wildly funny *My Life and Hard Times*. After working on newspapers in Columbus, Paris, and New York, he joined the staff of the *New Yorker* magazine. He was associated with the *New Yorker* for the rest of his life, first as an editor, then as a writer. He created essays, stories, and cartoons for the magazine and became one of its best-known contributors. Much of his work is collected in books with titles that reveal his ironic attitude toward the world at large: for example, *My World and Welcome to It*, *The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze*, and *The Beast in Me and Other Animals*. He also collaborated on a play with Elliot Nugent, an old college friend. *The Male Animal* was a considerable success when first produced and is still occasionally revived. Some of his best satire appears in *Fables for Our Time* and *Further Fables for Our Time*. Thurber also wrote several children's books that are regarded as classics, among them *The White Deer* and *The Thirteen Clocks*.