

the secret lives of walter mitty

The Secret Lives of Walter Mitty is a captivating exploration of the human desire for adventure and escape from the mundane routine of everyday life. The story, originally written by James Thurber in 1939, presents a character whose rich imagination contrasts starkly with his drab reality. This article delves into the themes, characters, and cultural impact of Walter Mitty's story, as well as the 2013 film adaptation that brought a modern twist to this classic tale.

Overview of Walter Mitty

Walter Mitty is a quintessential everyman, characterized by his daydreams and escapism. He works as a magazine editor, leading a monotonous life filled with unfulfilled aspirations. His vivid fantasies allow him to escape into a world where he is a hero, adventurer, and romantic. The contrast between his dreams and reality serves as a commentary on the human condition and the longing for a more exciting life.

Character Analysis

1. **Walter Mitty:** The protagonist is a mild-mannered man whose dreams of heroism starkly contrast with his real-life persona. He is depicted as passive and ineffectual, often overshadowed by stronger personalities. His character represents the struggle many face in finding meaning and excitement in life.
2. **Mrs. Mitty:** Walter's overbearing wife, who embodies the mundane and practical aspects of life. Her character serves as a foil to Walter's imaginative nature, representing the pressures of conformity and societal expectations.
3. **Supporting Characters:** Throughout the story and its adaptations, various characters serve to highlight Walter's fantasies and his struggles with self-identity. These characters often play roles that challenge or reinforce Walter's perceptions of himself.

Thematic Elements

The Secret Lives of Walter Mitty explores several significant themes:

1. **Escapism and Imagination:** Walter's daydreams serve as a means of escaping his unfulfilling life. This theme resonates with many who feel trapped in their routines and long for adventure.
2. **Identity and Self-Discovery:** Walter's journey is one of self-discovery. His fantasies reflect his desires and aspirations, leading him to confront his insecurities and ultimately seek a more authentic life.
3. **Conformity vs. Individuality:** The story highlights the tension between societal expectations and

personal desires. Walter's daydreams symbolize the struggle to break free from conformity and embrace individuality.

4. **Courage and Transformation:** Walter's character arc involves a gradual transformation from a timid dreamer to a man of action. This theme emphasizes the importance of courage in pursuing one's dreams and aspirations.

The Original Short Story

Written by James Thurber, the original short story was published in *The New Yorker* in 1939. It consists of a series of vignettes that illustrate Walter's daydreams interspersed with his mundane reality. Some key characteristics of the original story include:

- **Humor and Irony:** Thurber employs humor to highlight the absurdities of Walter's life and the stark contrast between his dreams and reality.
- **Vivid Imagery:** The daydream sequences are rich in detail, showcasing Walter's imagination and the thrilling adventures he embarks upon.
- **Cultural Commentary:** The story serves as a critique of the societal norms of the time, reflecting the desire for escapism during a period of economic hardship.

The 2013 Film Adaptation

Directed by Ben Stiller, the 2013 film adaptation of *The Secret Lives of Walter Mitty* takes a more contemporary approach to the story. While it retains the core themes of the original, it introduces new elements and a more expansive narrative.

Plot Summary

The film follows Walter Mitty, played by Stiller, who works as a negative assets manager for *Life* magazine. As the magazine transitions to digital, Walter faces the impending disappearance of his job. When a crucial photograph for the magazine's final print issue goes missing, Walter embarks on a global adventure to locate the elusive photographer, Sean O'Connell (played by Sean Penn).

Key Differences from the Original Story

1. **Character Development:** The film provides a more in-depth exploration of Walter's character, allowing viewers to witness his transformation from a timid dreamer to a courageous adventurer.
2. **Visual Storytelling:** The film showcases breathtaking cinematography, taking audiences on a visual journey across stunning landscapes in places like Iceland and the Himalayas.

3. Romantic Subplot: The film introduces a romantic interest, Cheryl Melhoff (played by Kristen Wiig), adding an additional layer to Walter's character growth as he learns to take risks both personally and professionally.

Cultural Impact and Legacy

The Secret Lives of Walter Mitty has left a significant mark on popular culture, resonating with audiences across generations.

1. Inspiration for Adventure: The film adaptation has inspired many viewers to step outside their comfort zones, encouraging a spirit of adventure and exploration.
2. Quotes and Memes: Iconic quotes from both the short story and the film have been widely shared, emphasizing themes of courage and the pursuit of dreams.
3. Discussion of Mental Health: Walter's struggles with self-identity and escapism have sparked discussions about mental health and the importance of addressing feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction.

Conclusion

The Secret Lives of Walter Mitty is a timeless exploration of the human spirit's yearning for adventure and fulfillment. Both the original short story and its film adaptation invite audiences to reflect on their own lives, aspirations, and the courage it takes to pursue dreams. Through Walter Mitty's journey, we are reminded of the power of imagination and the importance of embracing our true selves. As we navigate the complexities of modern life, Walter's story encourages us to break free from the confines of conformity and to seek out our own extraordinary adventures.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the main themes explored in 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty'?

The main themes include the contrast between fantasy and reality, the quest for self-discovery, and the importance of courage and adventure in overcoming life's obstacles.

How does Walter Mitty's character evolve throughout the film?

Walter Mitty transforms from a timid and daydreaming photo editor into a confident and adventurous individual as he embarks on a journey that challenges him to confront his fears and live life to the fullest.

What role does photography play in 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty'?

Photography serves as a significant motif, representing Walter's dreams and aspirations. It also illustrates his connection to his late father and the beauty of the world he yearns to explore.

How does the film portray the concept of escapism?

The film portrays escapism through Walter's vivid daydreams, where he imagines himself as a heroic figure. These fantasies highlight his dissatisfaction with his mundane life and reflect his desire for greater purpose and adventure.

What impact did 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty' have on popular culture?

The film has inspired a renewed interest in adventure travel and self-exploration, leading to a popular catchphrase, 'To live is to be bold,' which encourages individuals to step out of their comfort zones and embrace life's possibilities.

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