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The secret life of walter mitty short story character analysis

This Study Guide consists of approximately 38 pages of chapter summaries, quotes, character analysis, themes, and more - everything you need to sharpen your knowledge of The Secret Life of Walter Mitty. Mrs. Mitty is Walter's dominating wife. She nags him to buy galoshes, to put on his gloves, and to drive more slowly. When she asks Walter why he did not put on his overshoes before leaving the store, he responds with irritation: "I was thinking... does it ever occur to you that I am sometimes thinking?" But while Mrs. Mitty may appear overly controlling and condescending, Walter is incompetent and refuses to shoulder adult responsibility. Mrs. Mitty is Walter's link to reality; she prevents accidents and helps Walter avoid losing his grasp of everyday life. Walter Mitty Walter Mitty is a daydreamer who imagines himself the hero of his fantasies as a navy pilot commander, doctor, sharpshooter, bomber pilot, and noble victim of a firing squad. Mitty is married to a woman who treats him more like a child than a husband. This is due to his... (read more) Copyrights The Secret Life of Walter Mitty from Gale. ©2005-2006 Thomson Gale, a part of the Thomson Corporation. All rights reserved. May 13, 2019 by Essay WriterAmerican literature was founded upon strong ideals rooted in individualism, and as a result, many stories are written with the idea of "what does it mean to be an American?" Both Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and James Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" address the concept on what it means to be an American, based on their own lives and perceptions of the world they lived in. They both focus on fragmented protagonists that engage in escapist altercations to their realities to illustrate how they cope with feelings of powerlessness or impotence while being mentally and emotionally repressed by their spouses. However, where the two stories differ is in what type of "American" the protagonists envision and how they view their roles in their greater societies. In the case of "The Yellow Wallpaper" the narrator is attempting to reject the notion of the good "American woman" and her nightmares stand-in for the repressive world around her whereas Walter Mitty in his story dives into his idealized dreams and fantasies so that he may attempt to become the ideal "American man." Both "The Yellow Wallpaper" and "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" rely on dreams to show how their protagonists view themselves, based on how Gilman and Thurber's saw themselves as Americans and whether they fit the expectation of such a title or not. Gilman wrote in an article of her magazine The Forerunner in 1913 that she wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a response to the treatment of herself by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, who prescribed to her the same "rest cure" that her protagonist goes through (Gilman, 1). While under this treatment, Gilman found herself going mad, and after a brief recovery she wrote the story, hoping to save other women from such a fate. Gilman in this essay says that writing "The Yellow Wallpaper" made her feel "the normal life of every human being... which is joy and growth and service, without which one is a pauper and a parasite-ultimately recovering some measure of power." (Gilman, 1). In this passage, Gilman reveals that she views the role of an American person of every part of the world, to be one of personal betterment and working towards the growth of the world they live in. By not working or improving herself, Gilman felt less than human. These feelings are at the forefront of every page of "The Yellow Wallpaper." The narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is desperate to express herself, but finds herself unable to do so due to her overbearing spouse. The narrator is in a clearly unhappy marriage yet she still chooses to maintain a facade of ideal happiness and stability in order to fit into the society she so desperately wants to be a part of. She describes herself and her husband, John, as "mere ordinary people" in the opening of the story, despite that not being true at all as, besides her numerous mental issues, they are also shown as people of reasonably high wealth, as they're able to afford to stay in such a nice vacation house with many servants (Gilman, 1). The narrator is sent to live in isolation as a way for her to recover from her illness, but it ends up worsening due to her extreme sensory deprivation. This causes her to retreat from her sterile reality into her mind. The key to her escapism is within the mundane environment around her, an otherwise unremarkable wallpaper that covers her room. She is so desperate for some sort of feeling in her life that she sublimates all of these desires into the very environment that is suppressing her. This leads to numerous instances of oxymoron such as how she claims she "never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before" (Gilman, 4). Ultimately, the narrator is consumed by her fantasies, and she is reduced physically and mentally into a more primordial being creeping all over the room. Due to her reality offering nothing, the narrators completely checked out, deciding that titillating nightmare is worthier of living than dull reality. Just as "The Yellow Wallpaper" was based on Gilman's own life and insecurities in how she felt as an American citizen, James Thurber uses "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" to project his own being. Neurologist V.S. Ramachandran diagnosed James Thurber with Charles Bonnet syndrome, which is a neurological condition that causes the patient to have bizarre hallucinations. This parallels Walter Mitty as he regularly checks out of reality in what could be considered hallucinations. Thurber himself did not see this as a disability. In his essay The Admiral on the Wheel, Thurber describes himself as having "two-fifths vision" when he does not wear his glasses, and he goes into detail of all the wonderful and strange things he sees, assuring that with the way he views the world, no matter what, he'll have "a remarkable time." (Thurber, 2). By reading this self-reflection, one can imagine that Walter Mitty's daydreams are meant to be read as remarkable and wondrous. While Walter Mitty's dreams are dangerously unrealistic, perhaps Thurber is wanting to show the reader the power of one's imagination and idealist pursuits in retaliation to their mundane and overbearing world. The story of "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" bears similarities to "The Yellow Wallpaper" worth noting. Both are about unhappy and neurotic Americans trapped in mundane lives who are under the absolute control of their spouse, and their fantasies are an effort to compensate. The story being dominated by his dreams is clearly demonstrated from the very first line, which opens with an action-packed dream Walter is having. This is significant in showing that Walter is prioritizing his dream life above his reality, where he can project as much as possible. Walter Mitty, like the "Yellow Wallpaper" narrator, is powerless to his spouse, in this story being Mrs. Mitty. Mrs. Mitty is constantly bringing Walter out of his mind and repressing him in his life. When Walter is snapped out of his introductory dream, he sees his wife as "grossly unfamiliar, like a strange woman who had yelled at him in a crowd." (Thurber). This illustrates a clear disconnect between the two spouses, which is an idea also expressed in "The Yellow Wallpaper," and the two are making a statement about the struggles of the American married couple. Later on in the story, Walter Mitty attempts to stand up to Mrs. Mitty after she gets him out of one of his wartime fantasies. Walter asks her if she realizes that he sometimes thinks, that is, he is his own conscious person who can make his own decisions. She is not expecting this and attributes it to a bout of illness, saying that she will take his temperature later. Mrs. Mitty here is almost a genderbent John from "The Yellow Wallpaper" as both spouses utterly disregard the mentality and emotions of their partners, attributing any trace of expressed sentience as some sort of medical disorder. While both "The Yellow Wallpaper" and "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" deal with the concept of being an American from the eyes of their respective authors illustrated through fantasies, they differ in how they align with being an American, reflected in the nature of their fantasies, which lead to drastically different conclusions. "The Yellow Wallpaper" examines what it means to be an American female relative to Gilman's pre-women's rights era, and through the narrator's horrifying nightmares which trap her in this ideal, Gilman is protesting such a concept. In the case of "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," Thurber is describing an ideal American male figure relative to his World War II era, who uses empowering dreams for him to reach his ideal. The moral of "The Yellow Wallpaper" becomes clear once one understands this and is exemplified in her stand-in in the form of the narrator and how her nightmares reflect her world as well as affect her viewing of it. Despite being clearly based on herself, Gilman chooses to keep the narrator nameless because she believes this story can apply to any woman in the country, and she prides herself in the article "Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper", to her knowledge, "saved one woman from a similar fate--so terrifying her family that they let her out into normal activity and she recovered." (Gilman, 1). The story is a stark criticism of more than just the "rest cure," it is one against any form of medication and prescription that ignores the patient's mentality and rather treats the patient as a tool to practice one's treatment abilities. While they may mean well, the authority of the medical institution and their heroic standing in society often results in the mistreatment of patients and worsening of their conditions due to ignoring crucial factors of emotion, argues Gilman. Through John's self-assured authority and wisdom, the narrator is completely misinterpreted as ill, and the very acts trying to "cure" her result in actually driving her mad. This is a hyperbolic statement on how Victorian woman viewed themselves in rigid marriages. While the story is maddening and over the top, Gilman insists in her article that "it was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy" (Gilman, 1) by giving a voice to the voiceless and warning those who lead such institutions about what can happen when their power and authority goes unchecked. And, according to Gilman, it succeeded. Gilman crafts an innately feminine story with "The Yellow Wallpaper" about femininity and the feeling of oppression felt by females during her time. The narrator is constantly dominated by her husband, who is also her doctor. Here, John represents how two institutions, medical and marriage, are linked in keeping the narrator from being what she wants to be and limiting her ability to express and lead her own life. John sister, Jennie, is seen by the narrator as a "perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession" (Gilman, 4). Jennie is an example of an ideal American woman according to Gilman's time. She is enthusiastic about her limited pursuits and does not want for anything else. While there is nothing inherently wrong with being comfortable with one's life and profession, this works against the narrator as she insists that Jennie would think that the narrator being a writer is what made her sick. This shows the mentality women had at the time, how to not act "womanly" as expected of one means that they are, to use an Atwoodian term, "unwoman." Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" informs the reader of one man's idea of what an American man is like while also showing how American society affects said American man. The story was published during a dramatic paradigm shift in not only the United States, but the world as a whole in the form of World War II. Walter Mitty is an ineffective man in a world that is calling for the strength of great men to preserve their ways of life. For Walter, though, there is nothing to preserve. Mitty is a poor driver in his reality, but in his dreams, he is an exceptional and daring pilot, and he gains the respect of the other men around him, while in his waking life, he is nagged around by his wife and ridiculed by other men. Walter is also described as old, and his wife assures him that he is "not a young man any longer" (Thurber) which could explain why he appears to have such a bad memory problem and lack of motor skills, yet in his dreams, he possesses none of these negative qualities of age, which shows that, despite his failing body and mind, Walter is still able to view himself as a strong able-bodied and minded man. Thurber could be making a statement here trying to reach out to men who may stay on the home front, either because they do not want to fight or they are too old and weak to do so, that they are no less of a man as those who are those daring pilots in the war. Walter may not actually be a great man, but he views himself as one nonetheless thanks to his fantasies. "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" sees the titular protagonist engage in various daydreams of what an American man should be like, and while celebrating the ideal, Mitty himself is powerless and emasculated, being a man unable to live up to the expectations held of him. Each of these dreams expresses the desires Walter longs for as opposed to "Yellow Wallpaper" in which nightmares express what the narrator is afraid of. The unified idea present within Walter Mitty's dreams is one regarding masculinity, with Walter feeling emasculated by his aimless life and commanding wife. In his dreams, Walter is a strong hero reflecting what he wants to be as a man. He is commanding, cool, and charismatic, while in reality he is absolutely none of these qualities. As he makes his dreams so heavy on masculinity, it appears that his dreams undermine femininity. Women in his dreams are nearly absent and when there are women, they are just described as "pretty," such being the case of the nurse in his operation dream. This is to compensate for any femininity that Mitty himself may possess, as he appears weak and indecisive in his day to day life by allowing his wife to have control, and this serves as an example of how Mitty wants to be a masculine figure who is able to garner the attention of an attractive mate. This feeling of ideal masculinity ultimately permeates to the very end of the story, and apparently seeps into Mitty's reality. His final fantasy is a stark contrast from the rest. While the others are about him being put in daring and heroic situations, his final dream is of him about to be executed by a firing squad. This can be interpreted in many ways, but something that is interest of note is what Walter Mitty says in response to the firing squad, "To hell with the handkerchief" (Thurber). The handkerchief in question refers to the custom of putting a handkerchief over a person's eyes when they're about to be executed, in an effort to lessen the pain and fear. Walter rejects the handkerchief, offering to die as he wanted to live, like a man. This handkerchief can also be related to Walter's dreams. He engages in his fantasies to escape the pain he feels in his waking life, and now he is deciding he does not need them anymore. His final dream in the story being shot down by a firing squad, therefore, can be interpreted as Walter Mitty killing off his dream self, choosing to live only in his reality without the comforts of the handkerchief. While there is no epilogue or proper closure, his brief but still poignant rebellion at his wife when he insists that he is a thinking person coupled with this forsaking of the handkerchief and dream death allows one to imagine a reborn Walter, a combination of his pragmatic real self and his idealized dream self. Unlike "The Yellow Wallpaper" Walter Mitty emerges victorious and, in the words of Thurber, "Undeafated, inscrutable to the last." (Thurber). The two stories largely owe their success to how their respective authors develop their protagonists as symbols of ideal American life through how their ventures into their own respective psyches illustrate how they view themselves. Their common denominators for illustrating this is by illustrating how they escape from their mundane reality and authoritarian marriage into fantasy. The ground for contrast in these stories is how they interpret being a good American and how their protagonists respond to that idea. In the case of "The Yellow Wallpaper," the narrator is attempting to reject the conventional ideals of the American woman as her husband enforces them, which results in her escaping into her nightmares and mentally eroding away. In "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," Walter wishes to be in touch with that ideal notion of the strong American man, while his wife attempts to snap him back into his mediocre existence, and when Walter begins to wake up in his life, he kills off his dream self, offering a conclusion which could imply that he is ready to accept his real life, having grown more courageous thanks to his dreams. Works Cited Gilman, Charlotte Perkins (January 1892). "The Yellow Wall-paper. A Story". The New England Magazine. 11 (5). Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper." Forerunner. Oct. 1913. Thurber, James. "The Admiral on the Wheel" The New Yorker. Feb. 1, 1936. Thurber, James. "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" The New Yorker. Mar. 18, 1939. V.S. Ramachandran; Sandra Blakeslee (1988). Phantoms in the Brain. HarperCollins. pp. 85-7.

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