

James Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty": A garden path short story

By Anastasia Deibert

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Seminar paper from the year 2007 in the subject English Language and Literature Studies - Literature, grade: 1,7, University of Stuttgart (Institut für Literaturwissenschaft - Neuere Englische Literatur), course: HS Short Story and Short Story Theory, 14 entries in the bibliography, language: English, abstract: In the following pages I want to focus on James Thurber's famous short story "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" which was first published in 1939 in the magazine The New Yorker. Thurber tells the story of a Walter Mitty, a man who lives in a dream world to escape from the routines and humiliations which he suffers in everyday life.

Today the name "Walter Mitty" also exists in the English language and is used for people who are daydreaming and not paying attention to the real world.

Walter Mitty became an archetypal American figure.

By reason of the structure of the short story and "Thurber's own narrative style – economical, lightly ironic, and wonderfully expressive" (Holmes 218) it seems that this short story can be seen as a garden path story. The expression "to lead someone up the garden path" means "to deliberately deceive someone". Manfred Jahn analysed this short story with respect to his garden path short story theory. Can "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" generally be regarded as a garden path story? What is of particular interest is whether the reader is misled by Thurber's narrative technique especially at the beginning of the story. What are the reasons for Walter Mitty's escapist daydreams and how is Mitty's character presented in the story?

Firstly, I will describe the garden path phenomenon and applied to "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" I will analyse the beginning of the short story. In addition, I will name some hints where the reader realises Walter Mitty's various daydream episodes. In the next chapter I will concentrate on the story's two narrative levels. First of all, I will describe Mitty's development in the course of his daydreams and then I will take a look on the real Walter Mitty. Moreover, I will briefly try to find similarities between James Thurber and Walter Mitty. Afterwards, James Thurber's narrative style and his sense of humour will be presented. The conclusion will comprise the main points and some suggestions for further discussion.

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