



Literary Analysis: Character

A **character** is a person or an animal who takes part in the action of a literary work. You can learn about a character through the character's words and actions, the author's narration, and what others say about the character.

- A **round character** is complex, showing many different qualities—revealing faults as well as virtues. In contrast, a **flat character** is one-dimensional, showing a single trait.
- A **dynamic character** develops, changes, and learns something during the course of a story—unlike a **static character**, who remains the same.

The main character of a story tends to be a round character and usually is a dynamic one. The main character's development and growth are often central to a story's plot and theme. As you read, consider the traits that make characters seem round or flat, dynamic or static.

Reading Skill: Author's Purpose

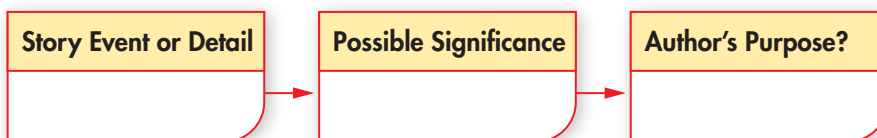
An **author's purpose** is his or her main reason for writing. In fiction, the specific purpose is often expressed in the story's theme, message, or insight. Pause periodically while reading and **reflect** on the story's details and events to determine the author's purpose for relating this particular story. Ask questions such as the following:

- *What significance might this event have?*
- *Why does the author include this detail?*

Based on your reflections, formulate ideas about what the author's purpose might be.

Using the Strategy: Author's Purpose Map

Use a chart like the one shown to organize your thoughts.



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Can truth change?

Writing About the Big Question

In "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," Mitty lives two lives: the one dominated by his wife and the one of his imagination. Use these sentence starters to develop your ideas about the Big Question.

Compared to our everyday life, the life of our imagination is _____.

Truth can change in our imagination because _____.

While You Read Look for details in the text that show how important Mitty's imagination is in his daily life.

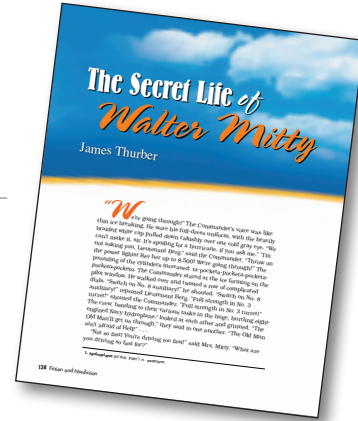
Vocabulary

Read each word and its definition. Decide whether you know the word well, know it a little bit, or do not know it at all. After you read, see how your knowledge of each word has increased.

- **distraught** (di strôṭ') *adj.* very troubled or confused (p. 130) *She was distraught over losing her wallet.*
- **insolent** (in' sə lənt) *adj.* boldly disrespectful (p. 130) *Her insolent words offended the guests. insolence n. insolently adv.*
- **insinuatingly** (in sin' yōō āt' in lē) *adv.* suggesting indirectly (p. 131) *My friend looked at me insinuatingly, as if she thought I had taken the money from her purse. insinuate v. insinuation n.*
- **pandemonium** (pan' də mō' nē əm) *n.* any place or scene of wild disorder, noise, or confusion (p. 132) *When the band left the stage, the crowd erupted into pandemonium.*
- **derisive** (di rī' sɪv) *adj.* showing contempt or ridicule (p. 134) *With a derisive laugh, the bully pushed the little boy off the swing. derision n. deride v.*
- **inscrutable** (in skrōōṭ' ə bəl) *adj.* baffling; mysterious (p. 134) *No one has ever solved the puzzle of his inscrutable personality.*

* haggard (adj.) having a very exhausted appearance

* craven (adj.) cowardly, fearful



Word Study

The Latin suffix **-able** means "can or will" or "capable of being."

Thurber closes the story by describing Mitty as **inscrutable** to the end. The word choice indicates that Mitty is able to remain mysterious to the last moment.



Meet James Thurber

(1894–1961)

Author of *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*

James Thurber was a rare writer who expressed his comic genius in both words and pictures. He wrote stories, plays, essays, and poems, and he was also a great cartoonist. Born in Ohio, he joined the staff of *The New Yorker* magazine in 1927. "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" was published in that magazine in 1939, becoming an instant success.

Humor and Anxiety Many of Thurber's stories and sketches grew directly out of his own life. As he put it, "Humor is a kind of emotional chaos told about calmly and quietly in retrospect." Thurber's characters try to stand up to the surprises of the modern world. Whether they succeed or fail, they always strike readers as authentic and very funny.

BACKGROUND FOR THE STORY

Reality and Imagination

Psychologists say that a person's thoughts are often a series of seemingly unconnected reflections. An event in the real world can prompt unpredictable mental responses, such as memories, snippets of songs, or daydreams. In Thurber's story, random events cause Walter Mitty's thoughts to jump back and forth between his exciting "secret" life and his humdrum everyday existence.

Did You Know?

Thurber offered a Hollywood producer \$10,000 not to make a movie about Walter Mitty. The movie was made anyway in 1947. A new version is scheduled to be released in 2009.

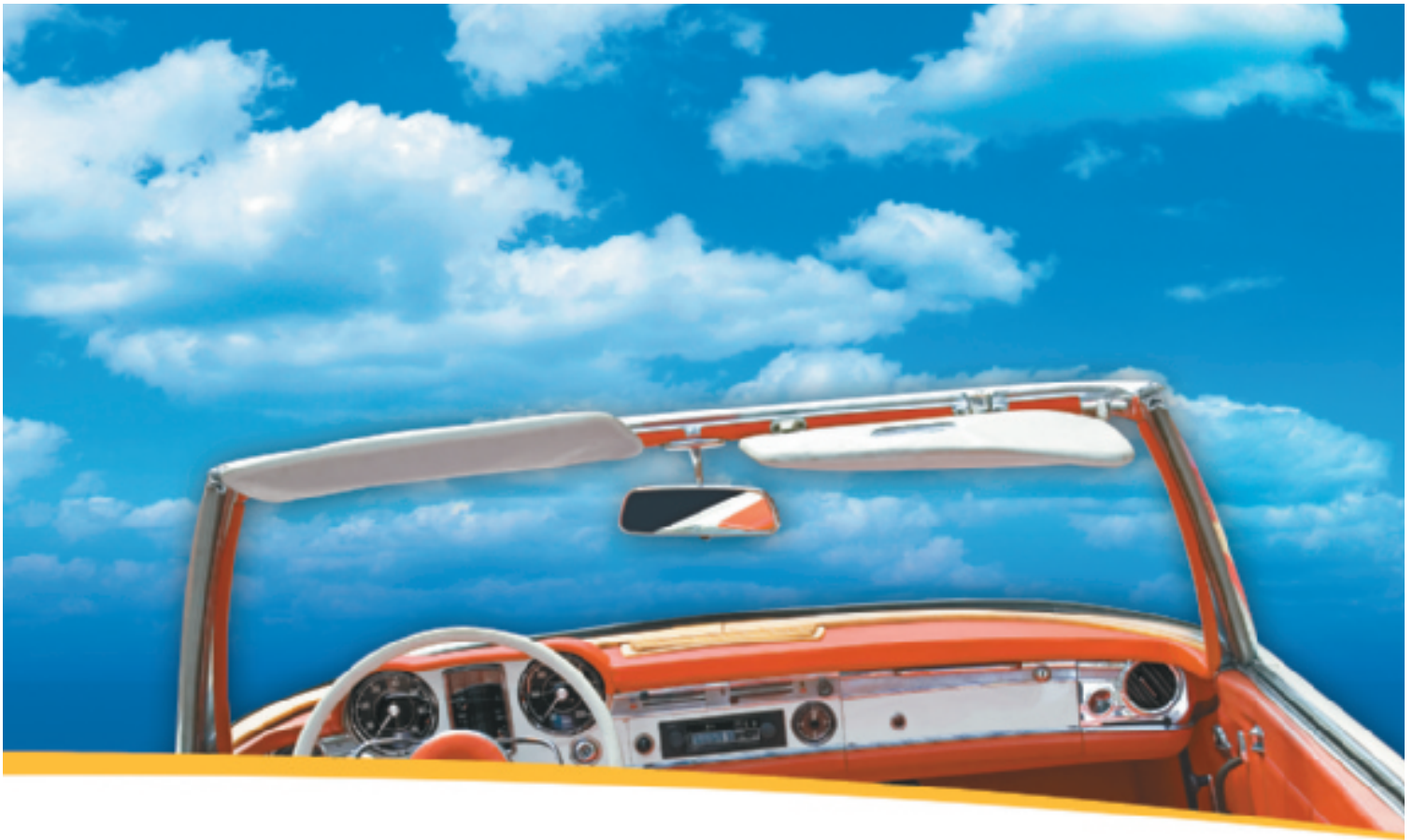
The Secret Life of *Walter Mitty*

James Thurber

*“W*e’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,¹ 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?”

1. **hydroplane** (hī’drō plān’) *n.* seaplane.



“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.

Reading Skill
Author’s Purpose

Pause to reflect. What does the phrase “intimate airways of his mind” suggest about the author’s purpose in writing this story?



Why is Mrs. Mitty upset?

Vocabulary

distraught (di strô't)

adj. very troubled
or confused



*Someone
handed him
a fountain
pen.*

Literary Analysis

Character

How does this shift in scenes show that Walter Mitty is a multidimensional character?

Vocabulary

insolent (in' sə lənt)

adj. boldly disrespectful

. . . "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 Mr. 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.² 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. Mr. 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,³ bringing Mitford and me up here for 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 anesthetizer 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 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.

2. **obstreosis of the ductal tract** Thurber has invented this and other medical terms.

3. **coals to Newcastle** The proverb "bringing coals to Newcastle" means bringing things to a place unnecessarily—Newcastle, England, was a coal center and so did not need coal brought to it.

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?⁴ 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

4. **carborundum** (kär' bə run' dəm), **initiative** (i nī' shē ə tiv) and **referendum** (ref' ə ren' dəm) Thurber is purposely making a nonsense list; *carborundum* is a hard substance used for scraping, *initiative* is a process by which citizens may introduce ideas for laws, and *referendum* is a process by which citizens may vote on laws.

▲ Critical Viewing

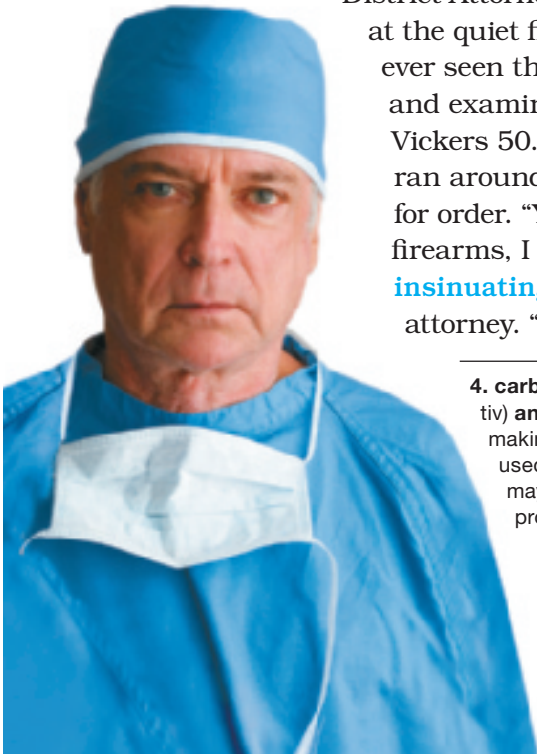
Describe a situation that might make Walter Mitty daydream about being a surgeon like the one shown. [**Hypothesize**]

Vocabulary

insinuatingly
(in sin' yōō āt' in lē)
adv. suggesting indirectly

✓ Reading Check

Why does Mitty say that next time he will wear his arm in a sling?



LITERATURE IN CONTEXT

Social Studies Connection

The Royal Air Force

Although he is American, Mitty fantasizes about being a brave and handsome English officer, a bomber pilot in the Royal Air Force (RAF). The RAF was officially formed in 1918 and distinguished itself in numerous air battles during World War I. RAF pilots would earn even greater distinction in the Battle of Britain during World War II. The reference to “Von Richtman’s circus” recalls one of the RAF’s finest moments—the shooting down in 1918 of Baron Manfred von Richthofen, also known as “The Red Baron,” who was Germany’s greatest fighter pilot.

Connect to the Literature

What elements of life in the RAF would Mitty enjoy?



Vocabulary

pandemonium

(pan' də mō' nē əm)
n. any place or scene of wild disorder, noise, or confusion

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 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,⁵ 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 Archies⁶ are pounding hell out of the air. Von Richtman’s circus⁷ 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 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*.”⁸ 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?”

5. **has got the wind up in young Raleigh** has made young Raleigh nervous.

6. **Archies** slang term for anti-aircraft guns.

7. **Von Richtman’s circus** a fictional German airplane squadron.

8. **“Auprès de Ma Blonde”** (ō prā’ de mā blōn’ də) “Next to My Blonde,” a popular French song.



Spiral Review

Theme What insight into daily life is suggested by the contrast between Mitty’s daydreams and his reality?

“We only live once, Sergeant,” said Mitty, with his faint, fleeting smile.



What triggers Mitty’s daydream about being a military Captain?

Vocabulary

derisive (di rī'siv) *adj.*
showing contempt
or ridicule

Literary Analysis

Character

How do Walter Mitty's responses in this paragraph indicate that he is a complex character?

Vocabulary

inscrutable (in skrōōt' ə bəl) *adj.* baffling;
mysterious

"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** to the last.



Cite textual evidence to support your responses.

Critical Thinking

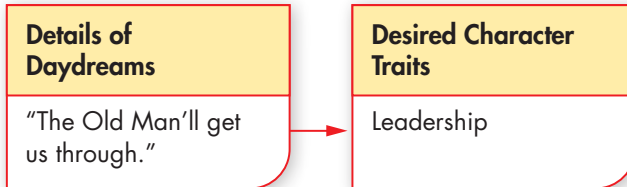


- 1. Key Ideas and Details (a)** What distraction jars Mitty out of his first daydream? **(b) Compare and Contrast:** Explain how Mitty's behavior in this daydream differs from his behavior in real life.
- 2. Key Ideas and Details (a)** In the "real world," what tasks are Mitty and his wife carrying out? **(b) Infer:** What deeds is Mitty attempting to accomplish in his fantasy life? **(c) Compare and Contrast:** How do the tasks of his daily life compare to those of his fantasy life?
- 3. Key Ideas and Details (a) Infer:** Which aspects of Mitty's personality trigger his final daydream? **(b) Draw Conclusions:** In what ways is this daydream a comment on his fate in real life?
- 4. Key Ideas and Details (a) Evaluate:** Do Mitty's daydreams help him in any way or do they hurt him? Identify three details from the story that support your evaluation. **(b) Discuss:** Share your responses with a small group and discuss the differences and similarities among them.
- 5. Integration of Knowledge and Ideas** Does Walter Mitty rely on daydreams to change the truth of his everyday life? *[Connect to the Big Question: Can truth change?]*



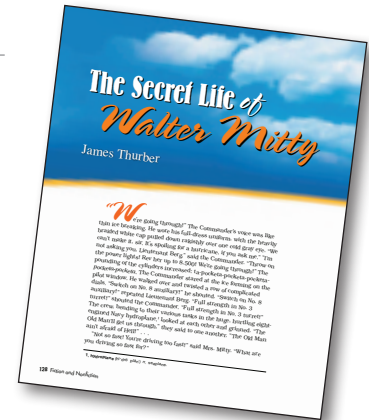
Literary Analysis: Character

1. **Key Ideas and Details** Mitty wants to be like the heroes in his daydreams. (a) Using a chart like the one shown, identify one detail from each of Mitty's daydreams and the quality that each detail reveals.



(b) Briefly describe the **character** of the man Mitty wants to be.

2. **Craft and Structure** Review the characters of Walter and Mrs. Mitty. (a) Determine whether each character is **round** or **flat**. Explain your responses. (b) Determine whether each character is **static** or **dynamic**. Explain.



Reading Skill: Author's Purpose

3. (a) What specific **purpose** might James Thurber have had for creating the character of Walter Mitty? (b) Identify three details from the story that support your responses, and explain how **reflecting** on them helped you determine Thurber's purpose.

Vocabulary

- Acquisition and Use Review the vocabulary list for "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" on page 126. Then, decide whether each of the following statements is true or false. Explain your answers.

- Someone who is *distraught* is likely to behave in a calm manner.
- Coaches encourage their players to be *insolent*.
- Inscrutable* handwriting is difficult to interpret.
- If you speak *insinuatingly*, you say exactly what you mean.
- A *derisive* comment shows great kindness.
- Pandemonium* might result if you gave unlimited candy to kindergarten students.

Word Study Use the context of sentences and what you know about the **Latin suffix -able** to explain your answer to each question.

- Should you give up when facing an *achievable* goal?
- If two bicycles are *comparable*, are they much alike?

Word Study

The **Latin suffix -able** means "can or will" or "capable of being."

Apply It Explain how the suffix contributes to the meanings of these words. Consult a dictionary if necessary.

unpalatable
interminable
portable