**Workshop 12:**

**A Reader Response Approach to James Thurber’s “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty”**

# a) Summary of the Short Story

As "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" begins, a military officer orders an airplane crew to proceed with a flight through a dangerous storm. The crew members are scared but are buoyed by their commander's confidence, and they express their faith in him. Suddenly, the setting switches to an ordinary highway, where Walter Mitty and his wife are driving into a city to run errands. The scene on the airplane is revealed to be one of Mitty's many fantasies.

Mitty's wife observes that he seems tense, and when he drops her off in front of a hair styling salon, she reminds him to go buy overshoes and advises him to put on his gloves. He drives away toward a parking lot and loses himself in another fantasy. In this daydream he is a brilliant doctor, called upon to perform an operation on a prominent banker. His thoughts are interrupted by the attendant at the parking lot, where Mitty is trying to enter through the exit lane. He has trouble backing out to get into the proper lane, and the attendant has to take the wheel. Mitty walks away, resentful of the attendant's skill and self-assurance.

Next, Mitty finds a shoe store and buys overshoes. He is trying to remember what else his wife wanted him to buy when he hears a newsboy shouting about a trial, which sends Mitty into another daydream. Mitty is on the witness stand in a courtroom. He identifies a gun as his own and reveals that he is a skillful marksman. His testimony causes a disturbance in the courtroom. An attractive young woman falls into his arms; the district attorney strikes her and Mitty punches him. This time Mitty brings himself out of his reverie by remembering what he was supposed to buy. "Puppy biscuit," he says aloud, leading a woman on the street to laugh and tell her friend, "That man said 'Puppy biscuit' to himself."

Mitty then goes to a grocery store for the dog biscuits and makes his way to the hotel lobby where he has arranged to meet his wife. He sits in a chair and picks up a magazine that carries a story about airborne warfare. He begins to daydream again, seeing himself as a heroic bomber pilot about to go on a dangerous mission. He is brave and lighthearted as he prepares to risk his life.

He returns to the real world when his wife claps him on the shoulder. She is full of questions, and he explains to her that he was thinking. "Does it ever occur to you that I am sometimes thinking?" he says. She replies that she plans to take his temperature when they get home. They leave the hotel and walk toward the parking lot. She darts into a drugstore for one last purchase, and Mitty remains on the street as it begins to rain. He lights a cigarette imagines himself smoking it in front of a firing squad. He tosses the cigarette away and faces the guns courageously-—"Walter Mitty the Undefeated, inscrutable to the last."

# B) Analysis

At its simplest, reading is “an activity that is guided by the text; this must be processed by the reader who is then, in turn, affected by what he has processed.” The text is the compass and map, the reader is the explorer. However, the explorer cannot disregard those unexpected boulders in the path which he or she encounters along the journey that are not written on the map. Likewise, the woman reader does not come to the text without outside influences. She comes with her experiences as a woman—a professional woman, a divorcée, a single mother. Her reading, then, is influenced by her experiences. So when she reads a piece of literature like “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” by James Thurber, which paints a highly negative picture of Mitty’s wife, the woman reader is forced to either misread the story and accept Mrs. Mitty as a domineering, mothering wife, or rebel against that picture and become angry at the society which sees her that way.

How does a woman reader respond to this portrayal of Mrs. Mitty? If she were to follow Iser’s claim, she would defer to the male point of view presented by the author. She would sympathize with Mitty, as Thurber wants us to do, and see domineering women in her own life that resemble Mrs. Mitty. She may see her mother and remember all the times that she nagged her about zipping up her coat against the bitter winter wind. Or, the female reader might identify Mrs. Mitty with her controlling mother-in-law and chuckle at Mitty’s attempts to escape her control, just as her husband tries to escape the criticism and control of his own mother. Iser’s ideal female reader would undoubtedly look at her own position as mother and wife and would vow to never become such a domineering person. This reader would probably also agree with a critic who says that “Mitty has a wife who embodies the authority of a society in which the husband cannot function.” She could see the faults in a relationship that is too controlled by a woman and recognize that a man needs to feel important and dominant in his relationship with his wife. It could be said that the female reader would agree completely with Thurber’s portrayal of the domineering wife. The female reader could simply misread the text.

Or, the female reader could rebel against the text. She could see Mrs. Mitty as a woman who is trying to do her best to keep her husband well and cared for. She could see Walter as a man with a fleeting grip on reality who daydreams that he is a fighter pilot, a brilliant surgeon, a gun expert, or a military hero, when he actually is a poor driver with a slow reaction time to a green traffic light. The female reader could read critics of Thurber who say that by allowing his wife to dominate him, Mitty becomes a “non-hero in a civilization in which women are winning the battle of the sexes” and become angry that a woman’s fight for equality is seen merely as a battle between the sexes. She could read Walter’s daydreams as his attempt to dominate his wife, since all of his fantasies center on him in traditional roles of power. This, for most women, would cause anger at Mitty (and indirectly Thurber) for creating and promoting a society which believes that women need to stay subservient to men. From a male point of view, it becomes a battle of the sexes. In a woman’s eyes, her reading is simply a struggle for equality within the text and in the world outside that the text reflects.

It is certain that women misread “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty.” I found myself initially wishing that Mrs. Mitty would just let Walter daydream in peace. But after reading the story again and paying attention to the portrayal of Mrs. Mitty, I realized that it is imperative that women rebel against the texts that would oppress them. By misreading a text, the woman reader understands it in a way that is conventional and acceptable to the literary world. But in so doing, she is also distancing herself from the text, not fully embracing it or its meaning in her life. By rebelling against the text, the female reader not only has to understand the point of view of the author and the male audience, but she also has to formulate her own opinions and create a sort of dialogue between the text and herself. Rebelling against the text and the stereotypes encourages an active dialogue between the woman and the text which, in turn, guarantees an active and (most likely) angry reader response. I became a resisting reader.