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*The Secret Life of Walter Mitty: An Unusual Hero's Journey*

When a person thinks of the 21st century modern hero, they often think of blockbuster characters such as Iron Man, Thor, or Wonder Woman. However, films like *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* prove that even the most regular and underrated individuals can become heroes as well. This motif of “unlikely heroes” has become more prominent in films, inspiring a feeling of confidence and hope into the people who watch the films. One example of this is Ben Stiller’s 2013 cinematic interpretation of the 1939 short story, *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* by James Thurber. The film follows Walter Mitty (Ben Stiller), a very introverted yet imaginative photo archiver who works in the basement of *Life Magazine*. After an important negative goes missing in the archives, Walter ends up on a complexly wild adventure throughout the world, changing his life and persona forever. Combined with the class text of “Alan Wartes’ Visit: Hero's Journey Presentation,” the viewer can understand how Walter’s journey both compares and contrasts with the typical Hero’s Journey. The entire film combined with The Hero’s Journey is a commentary on heroism, the power of imagination, the importance of risk taking, and particularly how these aspects can increase a person’s own sense of worth and potential.

Our journey with Walter Mitty begins in the busy and sensory overloaded Manhattan, NY. Mitty is a regular guy with a regular job, as communicated by his plain clothes and expressions. However, the viewer soon learns that Mitty has an adventurous fantasy life and

frequently imagines himself as a powerful superhero saving his work crush, Cheryl. According to Alan Wartes and Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey*, Mitty is in the "ordinary world," the first stage of the Hero's Journey. When Mitty realizes that the important cover negative for *Life* has gone missing and finds a mysterious clue with its potential location, he is faced with the "call to adventure." Mitty hesitates, but realizes that this newfound adventure could be his way into Cheryl's admiration and heart. He takes the leap, and travels the world in search of the photographer. From long boarding a winding highway, to fighting sharks in frigid waters, and fleeing from an erupting volcano in Iceland, Mitty falls down a shockingly real rabbit hole of excitement and adventure. He manages to recover the photo, and do some major soul searching along the way, becoming a hero to *Life*, Cheryl and most notably, himself.

As Elizabeth Stallings states in her study, *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty: Thought as Output, Machine as Cage, and Man as Producer*,

"Mitty's adventures fill the viewer with a sense of inspiration and wonder for these breathtaking settings, as well as admiration for Walter himself, as he manages to overcome every obstacle with a mixture of self-determination and the perfectly-timed altruism of the people he meets along the way"(Stallings 10-11).

Stallings sees that Stiller's adaptation of the story is one of hope and growth, as seen in almost every Hero's Journey story. Mitty goes from being a hopeless daydreamer to a visionary of his own fulfilling fate. He is a believer, which Wartes describes as someone who "accepts by the mind that something is true or real, often underpinned by an emotional event." Mitty believed that his own imaginative daydreams could not come true until he underwent his dramatically inspiring journey. This was a key moment in his own Hero's Journey as he crossed a major threshold and begin to make his daydreams reality. According to Stallings, one of the most

important and telling moments of this is when Mitty arrives at the top of a dangerous Himalayan peak after climbing for weeks on end to find the photographer. The image of him on top of this mountain is powerful, and makes the audience want to jump for joy and root for the protagonist. He finds the photographer and sits with him as they watch a snow leopard in the distance, deciding to not capture an image of it. The premise of the film is illustrated in this moment, as the viewer understands that there is a certain freedom to being a hero, and one cannot do it just for the camera (Stallings 12). Mitty must become a hero for himself, and no one else to truly grow as a person. This is a common motif of many Hero's Journey type stories, but the audience typically does not see this introspective side of it. Mitty does not save the planet, or rescue a damsel in distress like he had dreamed of doing; he rescues his own self esteem and confidence from a life of disappointment. He proves that even the most unsuspecting people can be a hero, whether or not it is for themselves or someone else. (Stallings)

Along Mitty's journey the viewer meets many characters who are quintessential to his own success and growth as a protagonist. In the Hero's Journey, these characters have archetypal qualities and labels that are parallel throughout most films following this guideline. He meets his first ally and trickster, an eHarmony sales representative who he frequently calls for advice on both his online account and life itself. Mitty's love interest, Cheryl, is also a necessary ally and herald to him as she frequently appears in his imagination urging him to cross thresholds by doing things that scare him. Of course there is also the shadow, or antagonist, of the story, which is the CEO of *Life* who fires Mitty for being unable to find the negative originally. While he does not adorn a black cloak or scary mask, the CEO is still evil in his own words and expressions that he relays on the beloved Mitty.

Meeting these characters and crossing the various thresholds are necessary to Mitty's adventure, but it his imagination that truly allows him to manifest as a brave hero. According to Josie Glausiusz in her article, *Living in an Imaginary World*, "Day dreaming can help solve problems, trigger creativity, and inspire great works of art and science. When it becomes compulsive, however, the consequences can be dire"(Glausiusz 70). Early in the film, the viewer can see how Walter's daydream escapes are detrimental to his mental and social health. He is constantly staring off into space, and blissfully unaware of his surroundings. It causes him to fall behind in work, and negatively view himself as someone who can't be successful, have a healthy relationship and most importantly, be happy. Mitty's ability to overcome these fantasies and insecurities is one of the many thresholds he must face. His reliance on false hopes and unrealistic daydreams are not as uncommon as one would think. Most people spend upwards 30-47 percent of their hours "watching their own mental videos," or losing themselves in daydream-like thoughts (Glausiusz 72). Daydreaming can be helpful for the mind, but can also be time consuming and self destructive, as the viewer sees with Mitty. He cannot derive any useful insights from his daydreams until he crosses his first threshold by traveling to Iceland and "seeing" Cheryl cheer him on in his imagination. When Mitty uses his daydreams to manifest himself as a real life hero, the viewer sees him cross the hardest threshold of all, realizing his actualization of human potential. (Glausiusz)

Imagination is a powerful tool, especially in Mitty's journey as an up and coming hero. His creativity and desires to be something greater than himself allow him to become the man he always wanted to be. Walter must do this by taking risks, something he had always feared as a regular man. Early on in the film, the viewer sees that Mitty is too comfortable being normal. He

wears simple clothing, is soft-spoken, and tends to hide himself in the burrows of *Life*. The CEO of *Life* is constantly railing him for daydreaming too much and being socially absent in the workplace. This initial and harsh criticism is one of the many reasons the audience understands why he is so insecure and shy. However, no amount of compliments or insults could change Mitty's circumstances. He must overcome the "ordeals," in his Hero's Journey, which is his inability to truly take risk and get what he desires, and he can only do this by taking a major risk to uncover the "the literal personification of Quintessence"(Stallings 12-13). He must do this by leaving the "ordinary world" of New York, and "approaching the inmost cave" of the rest of the world, which is Iceland and the Himalayas in Mitty's case. From jumping out of a helicopter to climbing monstrous mountains, Walter crosses major thresholds in order to unveil his assumed "award" of finding the photographer and lost negative. However, he discovers that this was not the true award of the story. (Stallings)

Upon Mitty's "Road Back," he realizes that the award was not scoring the girl of his dreams or winning his job back at life. His true "Resurrection," is when he realizes that the key to happiness was found in his own heart, and not the material world around him. The theme of self-fulfillment and ownership is prominent in this film. Mitty finally controls his own life, rather than letting those around him dictate it. He goes from an outspoken, fearful, and insecure man to an independent and fearless hero in a matter of weeks as he crosses multiple thresholds.

Through experiencing this journey with Walter Mitty, the viewer can understand how Mitty's own experiences transcend into their real lives. The Hero's Journey is truly not exclusive to films or novels, but can also provide deep insights into human life itself. *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* combined with Wartes' philosophies on the "Hero" inspires the viewer to take those

risks, and bring their imagination to life as Mitty did. Through this, the audience can increase their own sense of worth and potential, just like Walter himself. If a person is to follow down the path of a hero, they must face the challenges and thresholds of life without any doubt in themselves. The pursuit of true happiness will always be a struggle, but with risk comes major reward. One must leave the ordinary world and discover their true purpose to grow as a person as Walter Mitty states at the end of his newfound adventures, “To see the world, things dangerous to come to, to see behind walls, draw closer, to find each other, and to feel. That is the purpose of life” (Stiller).

Works Cited

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