

The poor relation by charles dickens and the secret life of walter mitty by james...

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



In both *The Poor Relation* and *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, the main story revolves around the main character's tendency to live in a fantasy world. In this way the two short stories are very similar. However, the way the two authors, Dickens and Thurber, have treated this main theme is quite different.

Firstly, the two stories are not the same. In *The Poor Relation*, Dickens has told the pitiful and yet undeserving story of a poor relative who's life has mostly been a disaster, though which he has lost everything, including his friends and companions. The story is set in the 19th Century, at a middle-class family's gathering. The "poor relation" stands up and tells his "story". He starts by reminding the family about what they have seen of his life. He then goes on to claim that this is not the truth and that his real life is far different to anything they could have imagined. This is when he explains about this real life in great detail. However, Dickens adds a twist in the end. It turns out that the poor relation's claim that he leads a secret life is actually false and it is simply his fantasy life; the life he wished he had led. His real life was in fact the one he had described at the beginning, a miserable and unlucky one. The life he wished he had led is the opposite of everything in his real life. The poor relation is a modest, shy, unlucky and dull character that is clearly feeling sorry for himself.

In *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, the story is told in the past tense. It is a simple story, about a Mr. and Mrs. Mitty and their everyday life. Walter Mitty, however, has a strange habit of daydreaming. He is capable of turning the most boring of everyday situations and sights into a dramatic, action packed

and humorous scene. For example, when he drives past a hospital, he imagines he is in charge of a complicated surgical operation in an operating theatre and when he sees a newspaper boy talking about a recent trial, he imagines he is the judge in a courtroom trial. He dreams these fantasy delusions to escape the dull life he leads with his bossy and slightly mad wife. Walter Mitty himself is a shy, laid back person. The story is set in the 1940's in America.

The techniques used in these stories by the two authors are also different. In *The Poor Relation*, Dickens delves into the fictitious world once, although for a long passage, and we do not know until the end that this is fictitious. He uses suspense in the first half of the story as the poor relation tells his family that he is not what they think he is and is to tell the truth after he has explained what he describes as "What I am supposed to be". This explanation of the real world and the fictitious world can easily be compared. For example, when he talks about his real life, he talks about his wife leaving him for rich man. In his dream world however, he states that one would expect her to go off with "some rich man", but in fact she stayed with him and lived happily ever after. This emphasises his regret that his wife left him in reality.

In *The Secret Life Of Walter Mitty*, the fictitious world is mentioned several times and in short passages. The situation differs every time Walter Mitty dreams. He usually floats into a dream when he sees something that captures his imagination. For example, when he drove past the hospital. In real life, he does ordinary, boring things and is "hen-pecked" by his wife. He

does as he is told, although reluctantly, because he is so far away in his own little world to care. It is clear from the beginning to see the difference between fiction and reality. It is interesting to compare the dull, uneventful real world Walter lives in to the exciting, dramatic and sometimes over-the-top world he dreams about.

The language in the two stories reflects the language used at the time of writing. As *The Poor Relation* was written in and set in the Victorian age of England, Dickens' time, it uses a formal, old-English language. As *The Secret Life* was written in the 1940's, after the Second World War, Thurber uses strange phrases and sayings from wartime/post-war America. Also, with Thurber being a 20th Century author, modern language has a greater effect on the language of the play. Therefore, *The Poor Relation* comes across as being more serious and formal as a pose to *The Secret Life*, which is informal and humorous.

Also, through the presentation of the two different characters we get a better understanding of how and why they slip into and out of their dream lives. In *The Poor Relation*, Dickens presents the main character as a stubborn and yet very unlucky, old man who has obviously failed in life. Therefore he searches for something to make his life seem worthwhile, which he finds through describing his ideal course of life. Dickens uses a similar character in "The Christmas Carol". In *The Christmas Carol*, the main character is Scrooge - a very stubborn, ungrateful, old man who has obviously failed in life. Towards the end of the story, however, Scrooge wishes he could have

led a finer and more honest life. There is a clear link between Scrooge and the Poor Relation.

In *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, Thurber describes the main character in much the same way - a shy, laid-back and yet still quite irritable husband who finds his life boring and meaningless. He is constantly being "hen-pecked" and "nagged" by his wife - so much so, that he has gone past the point of caring. Therefore he searches for something fresh to keep him stimulated in life, which is where his fantasy world becomes relevant.

Overall, I think that both Dickens and Thurber present their ideas of somebody living in a fictitious world with great effect. They both evoke pity for the main characters. Although more complicated to read and understand, *The Poor Relation* gets a better response from the reader. The reader feels sorry for the Poor Relation but the blame only lies on the Poor Relation; it was his fault that he had failed in life. *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, however, is simpler and therefore easier to understand and enjoy. The reader feels genuine pity for Walter Mitty but also finds the situation in which he finds himself to be humorous.