

Escaping escapism:
cinematic technique
and cumulative
message in 'the
secret life...



**ASSIGN
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Are forms of escapism like technology and social networks hindering us from living a fulfilling life or enhancing the experience of it? Many would argue that technology has started to distract us from reality and inhibit us from living in the present. In the movie, *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, Walter Mitty is an average middle-aged editor of *Life* magazine. He often zones out and daydreams of wild adventures that contrast his boring everyday job. He gets the opportunity to travel to Greenland and Iceland in search of a highly respected photojournalist, Sean O'Connell, and learns about what it really means to live and experience life fully on this trip. Ben Stiller, in his movie, *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, communicates to the audience, through the story of Walter Mitty and the use of symbolism, allusions, repetition, and characterization, his message that living primarily in reality rather than fantasy will lead to a more rewarding and fulfilling life.

Stiller uses the symbol of a ghost cat to describe Walter Mitty towards the end of the film as a man with a pure heart that doesn't beg for attention. When Walter meets Sean O'Connell in the mountains, Sean talks about the beauty of the the ghost cat they both see across from them, saying, "Beautiful things don't ask for attention" (Stiller). This reference to the ghost cat symbolizes Walter's character and his work towards the magazine. All this time he would work relentlessly to improve the magazine and adhere to the motto without asking for anything in return. He did not ask for any glorification or promotion despite being the hardest and best worker there. This showcases his great character that Sean recognized in him. Another display of Walter's character that Sean saw in him is when they were both coming down the mountain to play ball with the warlords. Walter asked Sean

about what the secret picture for the cover was and Sean responded with, “ Let’s just call it a ghost cat, Walter Mitty” (Stiller). Later we find out that the cover was a picture of Walter and was dedicated to those who had helped make the magazine what it had become. By rewarding those who did not ask for attention and still worked hard at the end of the movie, Stiller shows why it is important and of good character to do things because of the love and passion felt for it, and not just for the end reward. Many people do things for what they will get in the end despite how bad they feel when striving to get to that goal. This is commonly seen when people get jobs that they do not like just because they will make a lot of money. They may eventually get the amount of money they want but they will have lived a large portion of their life miserable doing a job that they are not passionate about. Stiller is teaching us that we should not just think about the end reward, but live in the present and enjoy the process through the symbol of the ghost cat.

Todd’s character in the movie plays an important role in identifying Walter’s development and characterization as the story progresses. After breaking out of his boring routine life, Walter was given the opportunity to travel, something very exciting and new for him. While on one of his adventurous trips to Iceland, Walter received a phone call from Todd, asking “ How was the... daydreaming going?,” Walter then responded with, “ Lately less,” and Todd replied, “ Good. Less is good!” (Stiller). By using the development of Walter’s character and his daydreaming situation, Stiller is showing that it is more fulfilling to go out and experience life and pursue one’s dreams than to fantasize about them. The fact that Walter’s daydreams began to dwindle after going out on those adventures he was previously daydreaming about

displays how much happier people could be if they got out of their comfort zone and chose to experience life than to just live in this fantasy world all the time. Stiller also utilizes allusions in a comedic way to exhibit Walter's development as a person. When Todd and Walter finally meet face to face Todd says to Walter, " I pictured you as this little grey piece of paper, but now I see you and it's like Indiana Jones decided to become the lead singer of The Strokes or something" (Stiller). The references to Indiana Jones and The Strokes to describe Walter at the end of the movie really captures his growth throughout the story. When Todd first started talking to Walter, he pictured him as a boring person who was not fully experiencing life and would daydream because he was stuck in his dull state. However, at the end of the movie, Todd saw how much Walter had changed for the better by getting out of his comfort zone and experiencing and exploring the adventures of life and not living in his fantasy world as much as he used to. Stiller's use of character development and allusions help communicate the idea that living in reality is more fulfilling than living in fantasy.

Stiller uses repetition of phrases and songs in the movie to inspire the characters and the audience to go out and experience the adventures of life. The repeated use of the song " Space Oddity" by David Bowie comes up multiple times throughout the movie. It is first used to make fun of Walter and his daydreaming, but shortly after he is teased with it one of his coworkers reassures him that the song is about courage and venturing into the unknown. Later on, it is played again but this time Walter has come back triumphant and confident. This song was used to fuel and motivate him into adventuring out and experiencing life. Another use of repetition Stiller

cleverly implements into the movie is Life's motto, "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). The motto was seen multiple times throughout the movie and is what Walter strived to uphold in the magazine. Every time he would see it, it seemed to give him a boost in motivation and inspire him to venture out and see everything life has to offer. Whenever he would lose motivation and interest in his dreams, the motto would always be there to inspire and help him push on. The repetition of this motto and the song that pops up throughout the movie is used to encourage the audience and Walter to venture and experience all the great things in life.

Escapism and living in fantasy can be beneficial from time to time, but should be avoided if it is causing the prevention of living a fulfilling life. Through the story of Walter Mitty, we can see that daydreaming for him was his form of escaping reality. When he started to see the adventures that was awaiting for him and started experiencing life, his daydreams stopped. This shows us that it can be much more rewarding to get out of our comfort zones and venture out into the unknown. By applying this to our everyday lives, we can live much more fun and fulfilling lives than if we lived in fantasy.