

James Thurber's use  
of character  
development: "Walter  
Mitty" and other  
works



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In *The Creative Process*, James Baldwin describes the purpose of the artist – “to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through that vast forest, so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place” (Baldwin 874). Author James Thurber fulfills his responsibility as an artist in his short stories, which deal with themes of dissatisfaction, identity, and the battle of the sexes. Through his use of strong character development in “*The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*,” “*The Unicorn in the Garden*,” and “*The Catbird Seat*,” James Thurber illuminates his observations of society's ills in the world.

In his short story “*The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*,” Thurber uses the protagonist Walter as a means of commenting on dissatisfaction with everyday life. In the story, Walter Mitty is an imaginative man trapped in a mundane life and finds himself submerged in fantasies as a Navy commander, a high profile surgeon, and a British pilot. Thurber's use of characterization is very telling of Walter's personality. For example, in his unhappy marriage, Mrs. Mitty treats Walter as if he is incompetent and lesser; their conversation boils down to snide remarks and condescending comments such as, “you're not a young man any longer...Why don't you wear your gloves? Have you lost your gloves?” (*Secret Life*). This lack of autonomy in his marriage is a major source of insecurity and ultimately forces Walter to resort to a fantasy world in which he becomes the dauntless, masculine figure that he can never be in real life. Through the use of character development in his comical short story, James Thurber conveys a much greater message of the tragedy of resorting to fantasy to escape the frustrations of real life.

In "The Unicorn in the Garden," Thurber utilizes the husband's character development to convey a belief of gender specific stereotypes. In this fairytale-like short story a husband sees a unicorn in his garden and notifies his wife who promptly dismisses his claim and heartlessly calls the police and a psychiatrist to take her husband away. When these responders arrive, they detain the wife and question the husband who vengefully denies his wife's claims. The husband's character is initially very deceptive, and it is not until he denies everything to the police that the reader understands his true intentions. Thurber presents an interesting plot twist when the husband highlights the absurdity of seeing a unicorn with the line "The unicorn is a mythical beast" (Unicorn). Ironically, the wife uses this exact line to dismiss the husband's initial claim of having seen a unicorn in the garden. Through this implicit characterization, the husband reveals himself to be not only sane but also vengeful toward his wife. By hiding the husband's actual intentions and only revealing his true persona at the end, James Thurber conveys his true beliefs - men and women are not meant to live together happily ever after.

There are many parallels between James Thurber's "The Unicorn in the Garden" and "The Catbird Seat"; while the latter is based more in reality than fantasy, both stories employ themes of gender stereotypes and the battle of the sexes. Thurber introduces the protagonist Mr. Erwin Martin as he is stealing a pack of cigarettes, and it is quickly revealed that he is planning the murder of Mrs. Uglie Barrows, a crass but powerful coworker. As he walks home, Martin delineates a detailed plan in his head; from this, the reader can infer that he is meticulous and disciplined. In the words of his

boss Mr. Fitweiler, "Man is fallible but Martin isn't" (Catbird Seat). Those who know him generally consider Martin to be a model worker, quiet and unassuming. Martin uses this innocent persona as a cover for his plan to murder Barrows, characterized as obnoxious and invasive in the workplace. Through his actions and thoughts, Thurber depicts Martin, as not only clever and meticulous, but also innocent in the matter. Mr. Edwin Martin is not in the wrong by plotting to eliminate Barrows; his plan is merely a "correction of an error" (Thurber). This portrayal of Martin as the "hero" of the story conveys a greater message of the inevitability of women to not only madden men but also hold them back.

Throughout his short stories "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," "The Unicorn in the Garden," and "The Catbird Seat," James Thurber often returns to one common theme - the battle of the sexes. Though with a humorous outlook, Thurber often paints the female characters in his stories as domineering and difficult to deal with as seen through Mrs. Mitty, the wife, and Ulgine Barrows. In each story, the woman is portrayed as burdensome and maddening. This misogynistic belief that women not only dominate men but hold them back undermines the significant achievements of women and ultimately harms the feminist cause.