

The Midlife Crises of Hanahoe and Walter Mitty

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1 Introduction

In the first term of 2022, a series of short stories authored by distinguished writers in English language was studied in the discipline of English Literature of an English Language Teaching graduation course. Throughout the work on the discipline, the professor proposed reflections about how similarly the main characters were developed in the stories according to their respective contexts.

Inspired by those discussions, we have decided to write this brief essay with the purpose of comparing and contrasting the process of transformation of the main characters of the short stories *Recuperation*, by Doyle (2003), and *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, by Thurber (1913), focusing on three aspects: midlife crisis ("Midlife Crisis", 2022), perspective towards life and resolution of the story for each character.

We believe that the theme that most noticeably permeates both stories is midlife crisis, a term coined by Canadian-born psychologist and psychiatrist Elliott Jaques in 1965 which can be defined as a psychological process endured by middle-aged individuals and characterised by feelings such as depression, remorse, anxiety and nostalgia in face of factors like growing age, unavoidable mortality and lack of achievements in life.

After exploring how each main character, Hanahoe, from *Recuperation*, and Walter Mitty, from *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, processes their midlife crises, this essay will conclude by highlighting a few insights that could be decisive for their crisis resolution.

2 The Midlife Crises of Hanahoe and Walter Mitty

A remarkable feature of both stories refers to the midlife crises lived by the main characters. Both, Hanahoe and Walter, seem to be middle-aged men suffering from lack of accomplishments in life, indifference from family members and a markedly lifeless, claustrophobic relationship with their wives. Doyle (2003) gives us indication that Hanahoe's marriage degraded over time without apparent reason:

There was no row or anything when she moved into the girls' room. He doesn't think there was. He woke up one night, and she wasn't there. And the next night he felt her getting out of the bed. It was too hot, she said. The night after that, she said nothing. The night after, she went straight to the girls' room. **A few years ago. Two, three.** The trainers still look new. **She never came back to their room.** And he never

asked why not. He's been wearing them for a month now. They still look new-white. It annoys him. (Doyle, 2003, emphasis added)

The way Hanahoe expresses his state of boredom is particularly curious. He assumes a passive stance towards his destiny. With regard to his marriage:

He doesn't know when it changed. He doesn't know when he knew. Before she moved out of the bedroom. They stopped talking. **There was nothing dramatic.**

He's been living alone for years. **He doesn't know what happened.** There was no shouting, very little. There was no violence. No one was hit. No one played away from home. He didn't. She didn't. (Doyle, 2003, emphasis added)

His insistence on the argument that his distress had no apparent reason could be interpreted as a form of escapism by means of his refusal to be held accountable for his fate:

Who's to blame? No one. It just happened. It's too late now. He can't pull them back, his wife, his wife, the kids. They have their own lives. She does; they do. Maybe grandkids will do something. If there are any. (Doyle, 2003, emphasis added)

In the case of Walter, it is possible to identify a different expression of passivity. He is unhappy with his marriage, "She seemed grossly unfamiliar, like a strange woman who had yelled at him in a crowd." (Thurber, 2013), but is unable to confront his oppressive wife, as reflected in Thurber's cartoon (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Thurber's cartoon on *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*



Source: Thurber (1969, p. 81)

Walter conforms to his situation by resorting to daydreams, which can be viewed as a form of escapism distinct from the one practised by Hanahoe. The first of his daydreams opens the short story with Walter imagining himself as the commander of a Navy hydroplane that bravely leads his crew through a dreadful storm. The reader is allowed to realise that the narrative was a dream when it is interrupted by his wife's blunt complaint:

"Not so fast! You're driving too fast!" said Mrs. Mitty. "What are you driving so fast for?" [...] "You were up to fifty-five," she said. "You know I don't like to go more than forty. You were up to fifty-five." (Thurber, 2013)

The main characters in *Recuperation* and *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* explore their unfavourable perspective of life differently. By and large, Hanahoe is pessimistic about the perspective of change in his life and this monotony is reflected by the mechanical pace of his walk. Either dullness or happiness occurred by chance, without him having been willing to take any active step to change anything. However, there is one passage where Hanahoe showed a faint expression of hope: grandkids, when and if they come, might be his saviours.

Who's to blame? No one. It just happened. It's too late now. He can't pull them back, his wife, his wife, the kids. They have their own lives. She does; they do. **Maybe grandkids will do something. If there are any.** (Doyle, 2003, emphasis added)

While Hanahoe keeps a rather hopeless though realistic perspective about life, Walter chooses to abandon his uninteresting reality, where he was a below-average ordinary person, to embark on imaginary fantastic adventures where he always was the protagonist of incredible feats of whom everyone stood in awe. Each of his daydreams are triggered and suspended by mundane facts. The brilliant surgeon's daydream, for example, is triggered when he puts on his gloves hastily and drives past a hospital after a cop tells him off for taking too long with his car stopped at the traffic lights when they switched to green.

He put them on, but after she had turned and gone into the building and he had driven on to a red light, he took them off again. "Pick it up, brother!" snapped a cop as the light changed, and **Mitty hastily pulled on his gloves** and lurched ahead. He drove around the streets aimlessly for a time, and then he drove past the hospital on his way to the parking lot. (Thurber, 2013, emphasis added)

Walter imagined himself to be a surgeon leading a highly critical case no one was capable of handling. With impressive ingenuity he repaired a complicated machine, vital for the operation to succeed.

A huge, complicated machine, connected to the operating table, with many tubes and wires, began at this moment to go **pocketa-pocketa-pocketa**. "The new anaesthetizer is giving way!" shouted an interne. "There is no one in the East who knows how to fix it!" "Quiet, man!" said Mitty, in a low, cool voice. He sprang to the machine, which was now going **pocketa-pocketa-queep-pocketa-queep**. He began fingering delicately a row of glistening dials. "Give me a fountain pen!" he snapped. Someone handed him a fountain pen. He pulled a faulty piston out of the machine and inserted the pen in its place. "That will hold for ten minutes," he said. "Get on with the operation." (Thurber, 2013, emphasis added)

The fact that the equipment-related onomatopoeia pocketa-pocketa recurred in several of Walter's daydreams suggests evidence of a connection to the reality, perhaps to the one piece of equipment Walter was able to operate – his car.

The way each of the stories end is also contrastive. Hanahoe's resignation tends to make the reader

believe in an equally tasteless end for the story but surprisingly there is a spark of hope in the figure of a little girl who breaks the swirl of indifference where Hanahoe was about to drown. Doyle (2003) leaves the story on a high note without a resolution, though. That is left for the reader to decide but judging by the hope towards prospective grandkids previously expressed by Hanahoe, the odds are that his full recovery, or recuperation, may come from the purity of children who would care about him truly.

A girl. Eight, nine – he’s not sure. [...]

[...]

She speaks.

[...]

He smiles.

[...]

The rain is gone. **It’s bright again.**

[...]

Nice kid. He smiles. (Doyle, 2003, emphasis added)

Similarly, we can find no resolution in *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*. That suggests that Walter will probably be carried away over and over as the wind blows, as more triggers from the real world pushes him to and drags him from his heroic fantasies.

Walter Mitty lighted a cigarette. It began to rain, rain with sleet in it. He stood up against the wall of the drugstore, smoking. . . . He put his shoulders back and his heels together. “To hell with the handkerchief,” said Walter Mitty scornfully. He took one last drag on his cigarette and snapped it away. **Then, with that faint, fleeting smile playing about his lips, he faced the firing squad; erect and motionless, proud and disdainful, Walter Mitty the Undefeated, inscrutable to the last.** (Thurber, 2013, emphasis added)

3 Final considerations

The rhythm of each story provides us with valuable insight about how Hanahoe’s and Walter’s midlife crises are particularly processed by them.

Hanahoe’s mental process throughout the story presents a pattern that encompasses fatalism and inertia; a faint foreshadowing of hope; and a stronger foreshadowing of hope for his recuperation. Whether Hanahoe will eventually heal his maimed soul is left on the reader but, there is a pattern conducive to a positive outcome.

The pattern verified in Walter’s mental process is essentially cyclical: a casual or unfortunate fact on the real world prompts him to daydream; his daydream is always heroic and tends to push back on the negative feeling caused by the triggering fact; another fact brings him back from daydreaming; and

the process reiterates. As a consequence, the reader is left with the sensation of no hope of recovery for Walter. The apparent conclusion is that Walter is imprisoned in a fatalistic spiral of escapism.

A more comprehensive, specialised psychological analysis of the stories is outside the scope of this essay and can offer an opportunity for further research.

Therefore, from the literary point of view, the study in this essay has brought two differing stances with regard to midlife crisis processing derived from two highly regarded works of literature. We believe that the authors were fortunate when they let the reader decide whether the story should or should not have a resolution because while the stories can be transposed into real human lived experiences, the way they are lived is particular to each person.

References

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