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Synthesis Essay

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The Meaning of Life

**What truly is the meaning of life?** Both the short story, “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” By James Thurber, and the movie, *Dead Poets Society* directed by Peter Weir, have different views, opinions and answers to what the meaning of life is. **Similarly, the story “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” and the movie *Dead Poets Society* both have themes of living a life one loves, while one can. “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” is about an old man looking back on life, regretting what could have happened through unrealistic dreams. In *Dead Poets Society*, the movie’s theme is about going out and seizing the day, accomplish goals while one can. Regardless, both express how one should live a life while young and do what one wants, what one won’t regret later on in life and to enjoy life and live to the fullest.** Both sources have their own idea on answering the question: **what is the meaning of life?**

“The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” is about an old man who constantly daydreams about unrealistic experiences and jobs he wishes he could have accomplished, like being the top surgeon in the world and have written multiple books on medicine. Walter is just stuck in his small town, with his bossy wife, doing errands everyday. His dreams are like an escape from reality, although, he keeps getting distracted. *Dead Poets Society*,about a teacher and his students, at an all boys preparatory school. Mr. Keating, the teacher is trying to aspire the boys to do what they love and live to their fullest potential. The students are faced with enormous pressure from the school’s standards, and their own parents. Mr. Keating is trying to teach the boys to use poetry and writing as an escape from reality and to become their own selves, without the thoughts or expectations of their parents influencing their futures.

**A similar message between both sources is to not move through life too quickly or one may look back on life with regrets on what could have happened.** In “Walter Mitty”, Walter’s wife, Mrs. Mitty tells him throughout “‘You’re not a young man any longer.’ He raced the engine a little” (Thurber). When Walter Mitty races the engine after his wife’s comment, it shows he has become annoyed with the statements made by Mrs. Mitty. Walter does not want to be looked at as an old man. He still wants to be young. Similarly, in *Dead Poets Society*, the teacher, Mr. Keating tells his students “Sucking the marrow out of life doesn't mean choking on the bone” (Weir). Keating is encouraging his students to make the most of life and not to move through life too quickly, or at a reckless pace. Likewise, in “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty”, Mitty shows throughout the story, he feels he should not have moved through his life at the pace that he had, because he is looking back regretting what he could have accomplished through his dreams. In both pieces the message is to slow down and enjoy life, while doing things oneself wants and loves to do.

**While “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” and *Dead Poets Society* have their similarities, there are also multiple differences between the two.** In *Dead Poets Society*, Mr. Keating is trying to inspire young boys to fulfill their futures with what they enjoy: "Boys, you must strive to find your own voice. Because the longer you wait to begin, the less likely you are to find it at all. Thoreau said, 'Most men lead lives of quiet desperation.' Don't be resigned to that. Break out!” (Weir) Keating is telling his students to speak out for what they believe and to follow goals. Mr. Keating is speaking and teaching young boys, he influences them to “Carpe, carpe. Carpe Diem. Seize the day, boys, make your lives extraordinary” (Weir) When Mr. Keating tells the boys to “seize the day” it inspires them to truly live each day to the fullest. Mr. Keating had an influence on most of the kids and encouraged the boys to do what they wanted despite parent’s expectations. This is a different theme in *Dead Poets Society* when being compared to “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty”.

A common occurrence throughout both sources is the common stereotypes being put on Walter and the boys. In Walter Mitty an example of this is Mrs. Mitty telling Walter what to do, and constantly worrying about him, “‘I was thinking,” said Walter Mitty. ‘Does it ever occur to you that I am sometimes thinking?’ She looked at him. ‘I’m going to take your temperature when I get you home,’ she said.” (Thurber) Mrs. Mitty knows about Walters day dreams and thinks he is sick, when Walter snaps and talks back to his wife, Mrs. Mitty immediately refers to him as being ill. Another reoccurring theme throughout “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” that is not evident in *Dead Poets Society,* is the embarrassment that Walter feels with his loss of masculinity that comes with old age. Walter Mitty feels embarrassed when he can no longer do things a typical man would do, like taking the chains of his tires: “The next time, he thought, I’ll wear my right arm in a sling; they won’t grin at me then. I’ll have my right arm in a sling and they’ll see I couldn’t possibly take the chains off myself” (Thurber) Walter Mitty would rather fake an injury rather then to face possible judgment from workers at the auto repair shop. In *Dead Poets Society* the young boys do not have to face the feeling of losing their masculinity, the boys are just beginning to gain it and figure themselves out.

All in all, “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” and *Dead Poets Society* both have common themes of living while one is young, doing what makes oneself happy and what one will not look back on regretting later in life. However, “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” has a theme of losing masculinity and in *Dead Poets Society* the young boys are just beginning to gain it. Both pieces express how one should live life to the fullest. Referring to both “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” and *Dead Poets Society* while answering the question: what is the meaning of life? The two state with their themes throughout, that the meaning of life is to constantly live life to it’s fullest potential and to do things that oneself thoroughly enjoys and makes them happy. One should not look back on life when they are old and regret not doing things, or wish that they had lived a life they enjoyed more.

# Works Cited

*Dead Poets Society*. Dir. Peter Weir. Touchstone Pictures, Silver Screen Partners IV. 1989. Electronic .

Thurber, James. "The Secret Life Of Walter Mitty." *The New Yorker* 18 March 1939.