The Country Husband Study Guide

The Country Husband by John Cheever

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Introduction

"The Country Husband," first published in 1954, appeared in John Cheever's 1958 collection of short stories, *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill.* This collection offered various points of view reflecting life in the New England suburb of Shady Hill. "The Country Husband" is considered one of the best stories in the book, and besides winning a 1956 O. Henry Award, it was included in the 1979 Pulitzer Prize-winning collection, *The Stories of John Cheever.*

"The Country Husband" has many of Cheever's trademarks. It is set in the suburbs, features a character at a crossroads, and reveals the spiritual bankruptcy of many aspects of suburban life. It is a complex yet accessible story that portrays a lifestyle that was common fifty years ago yet continues to be meaningful for readers today.

Author Biography

John Cheever was born in Quincy, Massachusetts, on May 27, 1912, the second son of Frederick and Mary Liley Cheever. Cheever's home life was difficult; he had a tumultuous relationship with his brother, and his parents were cold and distant. Expelled from Thayer Academy at the age of seventeen, Cheever went to New York City.

Cheever's career started almost immediately upon his arrival in New York. He befriended the director of Yaddo, a writers' colony in upstate New York. At Yaddo, Cheever met e. e. cummings, John Dos Passos, and James Agee. Still seventeen, Cheever sold a story to *New Republic,* and five years later he was a regular contributor to the *New Yorker.* His connection to the *New Yorker* endured for decades, which led some critics to categorize his short stories as being strictly in the *New Yorker* style and, therefore, a narrow appeal. When he won the 1979 Pulitzer Prize for *The Stories of John Cheever* (which includes "The Country Husband"), however, he was taken seriously by readers and critics. Cheever is called the American Chekhov because just as Anton Chekhov portrayed the lives of everyday Russian people, Cheever portrayed daily life in middle-class America.

Cheever married Mary Winternitz on March 22, 1941, and they eventually had four children. In 1942, he enlisted in the Army, where he was a scriptwriter for training films until his 1945 discharge. He continued to write for magazines, compiled collections for publication, and started working on novels.

Cheever won the National Book Award in 1958 for his first novel, *The Wapshot Chronicle,* although he is better known for his short stories. His novels address the same ideas as his short stories and feature the same New England suburban settings. Most of his characters are white, middle-class, Protestant, family people whose crises emerge from growing dissatisfaction with their lives.

As he grew older, Cheever found it increasingly difficult to deal with his alcoholism and was confused by his sexual orientation. His drinking problem began in the 1950s, and in 1975, he checked himself into a rehabilitation program. Over the years, Cheever's problems with his marriage and the realization that he was bisexual created further turmoil.

Cheever died in Ossining, New York, on June 18, 1982, of kidney and bone cancer. He is buried in Norwell, Massachusetts.

Plot Summary

"The Country Husband" opens as Francis Weed, a middle-aged family man, is aboard a plane that is making an emergency crash landing in a corn field. When he returns home, his wife, Julia, and their four children are uninterested in his experience. Francis, however, feels that he has been given a second chance to live life.

After dinner, Francis goes to his backyard garden where he thinks about his experience and listens to the usual sounds of his suburban neighborhood. The narrator tells the reader that the Weeds are social people. Julia is especially wrapped up in the social life of Shady Hill, the New England suburb in which they live.

The next evening, Francis and Julia attend a party, and everything seems as usual. When Francis notices the maid, he recognizes her. He recalls a time during the war when he was in France and saw a woman publicly humiliated for living with a German officer. Her head was shaved and she was forced to walk out of town naked. The maid is this woman, but Francis tells no one about this compelling incident. He knows that the party-goers are content pretending that nothing bad has ever happened or ever will.

Francis and Julia return home to a new babysitter, a teenager named Anne Murchison. Francis is instantly fixated on the girl; he drives her home and feels sorry for her when she tells him about her father's drinking problem. Francis becomes obsessed with the girl, imagining that they will have a sexual relationship. These fantasies make him feel alive and seem to embolden him to acts of rebellion, such as insulting one of the leading members of Shady Hill society.

One day, Francis arrives home to find Anne in the hallway. He brazenly kisses her (she resists) and is seen by Gertrude, a neighborhood girl who is also standing in the hallway. He tells Gertrude not to tell anyone what she saw. The narrator does not say what Anne does after the kiss.

Later, Clayton Thomas, a young man in the neighborhood, visits the Weeds. Clayton has no tolerance for the artificiality of Shady Hill and plans to move to New York with his mother. He also plans to marry Anne when she finishes high school. After Clayton leaves, Francis and Julia have a fight that almost leads to Julia's leaving.

The next day at work, Francis is asked to help Clayton find a job, but Francis undermines him instead. At this point, Francis decides to see a psychiatrist to help him deal with his feelings for Anne. The psychiatrist recommends a distraction, so Francis takes up woodworking. As the story ends, Francis is in the cellar making a coffee table.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The story opens with Francis Weed, the protagonist, on a plane flying into a storm. As the turbulence worsens and his fear increases, he tries to distract himself by focusing on the ordinariness of things around him: the man next to him soothing his own fears with the contents of a flask, a child crying, his left foot, which has fallen asleep. He tries reading, but that also fails to keep his mind off the danger. He sees a bit of irony now in the little window curtains that give the cabin an atmosphere of "misplaced domesticity." When the lights fail, the man next to him begins to talk about the cattle farm in New Hampshire that he has always wanted. The pilot announces an emergency landing, and then begins singing a song.

The plane crashes in a cornfield, but miraculously all aboard survive. As a stewardess throws open the door, Francis hears the rain, "the sweet noise of their continuing mortality…" Still anxious, the passengers leave the plane praying nothing else will happen to them. They take shelter in a barn briefly, until taxis arrive to take them to Philadelphia. Then, it is as if the crash were a minor detour on the way home. Francis boards a train to New York and then takes his usual commuter to Shady Hill. On the commuter, he sits with his neighbor Trace Bearden and tells him the story of his brush with death, but Trace is not interested. In the late September sun, they part company on the platform. Francis drives his secondhand Volkswagen to his Dutch Colonial in the Blenhollow subdivision.

Inside, all is as it should be. The house is clean and neat. The table, laid for six, is topped with candles and a bowl of fruit. A vase of roses is on the polished piano. Francis' youngest children, Louisa, Henry and Toby are in the living room. His wife, Julia, is in the kitchen. Francis tries to tell her about the plane crash, but the children begin to fight and Toby starts to cry. Julia pays Francis no attention. She lights the candles on the table, announces that dinner is ready and asks Francis to tell Helen.

Francis says he is tired, that he has been in a plane crash. No one responds, so he goes upstairs to tell his story to his daughter Helen. He forgets to do so when he finds her reading "True Romance," which he has forbidden her to buy. As they join Julia at the table, Francis asks Toby, who is still crying, if he wants to hear about the plane crash. Julia interrupts, threatening to send Toby to bed if he does not stop crying. As Toby jumps up and runs to his room, Julia follows him, and Francis calls after her saying she will spoil him.

As they all sit down once more and begin to eat, the children start bickering again. Francis suggests to Julia that the kids eat earlier so they can enjoy a meal in peace. Julia, who is ready for Francis' complaint, says she refuses to cook two dinners and set two tables. Francis says he has been in a plane crash and does not like to come home every night to a battlefield. Julia gets defensive and says it is not every night and things

were fine until he got home. The children comfort her and they go upstairs together leaving Francis alone at the table.

Francis needs air and walks out into the garden, where he hears old Mr. Nixon shouting at the squirrels, a door slamming and a lawn mower. Donald Goslin is playing "Moonlight Sonata" as he does most every night. Francis calls Jupiter, the Mercers' retriever, who arrives with the remains of a felt hat in his mouth. Francis worries that someone will soon poison the mischievous dog.

The day after the crash, Francis and Julia have dinner at the Farquarsons. Francis sees a new maid and senses that he has seen her somewhere before. At the end of the war in Trenon, Normandy, he saw a woman publicly humiliated for living with a German commandant during the occupation. Her hair was shorn and she was stripped naked. It is a fantastic story that he realizes he cannot share with his neighbors, who want to believe there was no war.

When they return home, Francis remains in the car to drive the babysitter home. She is new, a beautiful and perfect girl, who captures his imagination immediately. Anne Murchison is upset and confides in Francis as she cries on his shoulder. He loses control and embraces her. She pulls away, straightens up and gives him directions to her house. They leave the car as if ending a date, holding hands, briefly kissing at the door. It is enough to fuel Francis' dreams that night, of the two of them in Paris. He wakes feeling guilty and chooses to dream again, this time about something that will not hurt anyone.

In the morning, he remembers only his dream about Anne. He is completely distracted and bombarded with images that seem to have a message for him: the icy rain that signals the coming of winter and a naked woman combing her hair in the window of a sleeper car. Mrs. Wrightson interrupts his daydream when she joins him on the platform and goes on at length about the trials of choosing the right curtains for her windows. Francis suggests that she paint the windows black and shut up. He enjoys being deliberately rude, something he has not done since he was young. He thinks Anne has brought out in him a bracing "independence."

His secretary Miss Rainey is late, probably an appointment with her psychiatrist. He wonders what advice the psychiatrist would have for him about his desire for Anne. His excitement is punctured by the photo of his four children on his desk and his firm's suddenly ominous logo of a priest and his sons in the coils of a snake.

He has lunch with Pinky Trabert, who talks loosely about moral issues, but reminds him that no one he knows has ever been involved in scandal. Right after lunch, he goes to a jeweler and buys a bracelet for Anne. He has a secret, and the clandestine purchase delights him. After thinking of her all day, it is as if Francis has conjured her. He finds her in the foyer of his home, and without thinking wraps his arms around her and kisses her. They are seen by Gertrude Flannery, a neighborhood kid who wanders in and out of all the houses in the neighborhood. Francis gives her a quarter and tells her to go home and not to tell anyone what she has seen.

While Francis and Julia are at a party later that night, all he can think about is what he will do with Anne when he drives her home. His fantasies embolden him. He laughs louder and listens to his neighbors' stories with a more sympathetic ear. When they get home, he is devastated to learn that someone has already driven Anne home. Francis believes he is in love with her.

The following day, Francis gets home to find the family is dressed for their annual greeting card picture. He goes upstairs to dress and keeps the family waiting while he writes a love letter to Anne.

Clayton Thomas comes over that night to pay Julia for theater tickets she gave his mother Helen. His father died in the war, so his family is the only one in the neighborhood "missing a piece." Clayton, who has been in trouble with the law, opens up to Francis and Julia, telling them of his dashed aspirations due to their financial troubles. Despite the fact that he cannot finish school, the teenager has conflicting and grandiose ideas about becoming a minister or a writer or working in a bank. He then announces that, with the money he made cutting lawns over the summer, he bought a fake emerald and has become engaged to Anne Murchison.

Francis is horrified, particularly when Clayton suggests having sex with Anne by mentioning their plans to have a large family. After Clayton leaves, Francis cannot hide his disgust, even from Julia, and tells her the boy is a complete failure. Julia, who does not understand the reason for his reaction, criticizes him for his intolerance. She also seizes this opportunity to tell him that his rudeness to Mrs. Wrightson has cost them an invitation to her party. Parties and social position are important to Julia, and she accuses Francis of trying to ruin the lives of his wife and children. The argument escalates and Francis puts an end to it by hitting Julia. As she packs her suitcase to leave him, Julia accuses Francis of not loving her. As proof, she points out that he leaves his dirty laundry on the floor for her to pick up. Each says the other has become dependent, and Julia who believes this is true of Francis tells him she will stay because he needs her to take care of him a while longer.

The following morning, Francis is again fantasizing about Anne. On the train, he wants to see her so badly that he mistakes an old woman for her. At work, he finds it difficult to keep up his daydreaming when Julia calls to remind him about plans for dinner and Trace Bearden calls to ask him to help Clayton Thomas get a job with Charlie Bell. Trace gets a reaction similar to the one Julia got concerning Clayton. Francis refuses, saying the boy is worthless.

Francis' secretary tells him she has gotten a better job and leaves him alone to think about what he has just done to Clayton. He decides that he needs to talk to someone about the growing conflict between the life he has and the life he thinks he wants. He has always been a very private person and fears sharing his thoughts. He chooses to see Miss Rainey's psychiatrist, a stranger to him. On the way into Dr. Herzog's office, he is patted down by a police officer looking for a patient who has threatened to kill the doctor. This does not deter him; he walks in and declares his problem- that he is in love.

A week or so later, Francis is in the basement building a coffee table because Dr. Herzog recommends woodworking as therapy. Elsewhere in Shady Hill, the usual after-dinner routine is underway. Toby is changing out of his cowboy costume and into his spacesuit. Mrs. Masterson is trying to get Gertrude to leave her house. Mrs. and Mrs. Babcock are chasing each other around the house naked because the kids are away at school. Mr. Nixon is shouting at the squirrels. A cat dressed in doll clothes wanders into the garden. Jupiter plows through the tomatoes with the remains of a bedroom slipper in his mouth.

Analysis

"The Country Husband," was a series of reflections on life in the New England suburb of Shady Hill. In fact, "The Country Husband" won an O. Henry Award in 1956. In addition, it was included in the 1979 Pulitzer Prize-winning collection, *The Stories of John Cheever*.

Like many of Cheever's stories, "The Country Husband" is set in the suburbs and features a protagonist in a complex situation trying to make a substantial decision.. It details a lifestyle that many aspired to during the 1950s. Some readers may recognize their parents, their neighborhood and their evening rituals. Therefore, at times, the story conjures a nostalgic wistfulness even as it reveals the moral bankruptcy that conformity in suburbia demanded.

The first hint of what is to come occurs on the plane going down when the passenger next to Francis thinks he is going to die and expresses what he really wanted in life. We know he has already compromised his life in ways that will never allow him to pursue his dream. Even after he survives this brush with death, he will simply go back to a life that looks like everyone else's.

What is it that Francis really wants? This extraordinary event compels him to explore the question. It is evident that he leads a compromised life like that of his fellow passenger. As a means of calming himself during the impending disaster, Francis chooses to focus on the ordinary things around him, avoiding how he feels about dying in a plane crash. Surely such a normal scene – his left foot asleep, a child crying, and curtains in the window – could not be the setting for a disaster. He describes his home much the same way: the table is set with candles and a bowl of fruit; the highly polished piano is topped with a vase of roses; his wife, a good cook, is in the kitchen.

However, there is something dreadfully wrong with what it takes to maintain this picture-perfect existence. It involves rejecting any thought, word or deed that is out of the ordinary. Certainly, almost dying in a plane crash would be, under "normal" circumstances, a riveting story. Conscious people would react in horror. They would express concern, sympathy, perhaps even monitor the loved one for signs of how he is coping with the trauma. That is not what happens to Francis, first as he tries to recount his story to Trace Bearden, then later as he tries to tell his wife and children several times. At one point, Francis tells Julia he has been in a plane crash and does not like to

come home every night to a battlefield. Julia gets defensive and says it is not every night – completely ignoring the words she has never heard before, the words that are not part of her routine existence.

After supper, Francis is somewhat reassured by the usual sounds of a suburban neighborhood, but he also feels frustrated and wanting. He identifies with the high-spirited dog named Jupiter, who is so out of place in the neighborhood that Francis thinks someone might kill him. Francis is also wondering how he fits into the neighborhood and what the consequences might be if he does not.

A second remarkable event takes place the following night at the Farquarsons that underscores Francis' inner struggle with conformity. He recognizes the maid as a woman punished during the occupation for bedding a German commandant. He remembers her, with some admiration, as defiant even after she had been stripped naked and her hair shorn. She is now a quiet servant in a uniform. Francis would like to tell the remarkable story, but he knows that no one would understand his need to tell such a story, especially since people want to pretend that nothing as unpleasant as a war even occurred.

Francis finds a target for his emotions in the distraught babysitter, Anne Murchison, who leaves him feeling less alone. Here is someone who expresses a full range of emotions. Perhaps only because of her youth, she is still completely open and vulnerable, which are qualities Francis once prized in his self.

Francis begins to struggle with his desires for Anne, first in his dreams and then in lucid moments, as when his reverie is interrupted by trivialities. The first of these events occurs when an older socialite, Mrs. Wrightson, bores him with details of her search for the perfect curtains. He puts an end to their conversation by being "deliberately rude," something he has not done since he was young. He enjoys the feeling and credits Anne for its inspiration.

His euphoria is short-lived as he is reminded of the life he lives by the symbol he keeps on his desk, a photo of his four laughing children. He also realizes what his infatuation with Anne could do to that life as he gazes at his firm's logo showing a priest and his sons in the coils of a snake. His conversation with Pinky Trabert makes him think of what a scandal it would be if he were to act on his feelings.

He takes a step toward acting on those feelings by buying a bracelet for Anne, a visible symbol of his feelings, and is excited to have a secret. When he returns home to find her in the foyer, he reacts purely from desire, wanting to possess her with no thought about the consequences. Yet, when Gertrude Flannery witnesses his indiscretion, Francis panics. Francis is far safer fantasizing about what he will do with Anne, which he does throughout the party that evening. His hopes are dashed when he discovers someone else has driven her home, and his despair makes him desire her even more.

Even as his family gets ready to pose for the annual holiday greeting card – the very symbol of domestic bliss – Francis defies convention by writing Anne a schoolboy's love

letter. Later, his love turns to jealousy when Clayton Thomas, a neighborhood boy of dubious talents and ambitions, tells Francis that he and Anne plan to marry and have a large family. When Francis disparages the boy to Julia, Julia takes the opportunity to pick a fight. She tells him that his intolerance of others is hurting her and their children. She cites his rudeness to Mrs. Wrightson as damaging to their social position. When Francis ends the fight by hitting Julia, the following dialogue reveals the hollowness of this marriage as nothing more than mutual dependence.

Events the following day bring Francis to the breaking point. He knows he must make a decision. He has always kept his own council and is afraid to confide in anyone – to lose his "perfect loneliness." However, he cannot ignore the feeling that he is lost and that without help he will not be able to find his way back. He chooses as confidant a stranger, Dr. Herzog, who is protected by a police officer because a patient has threatened to kill him. This might have given most new patients pause, but Francis needs to tell someone the remarkable story of his teetering on the brink of nonconformity. In the story's climactic scene, he rushes into the doctor's office and says that he is in love.

In the next scene, Francis appears to have made his decision. He has followed a recommendation by Dr. Herzog that he takes up a hobby in lieu of pursuing Anne. As he busies his hands by building a coffee table in the basement, all is the same in his house and neighborhood. Only Jupiter is still up to tricks. The story ends with these grandiose lines, which Cheever once declared to his own family simply to draw a reaction. They are in stark contrast to the placid Shady Hill scene, "Then it is dark; it is a night where kings in golden suits ride elephants over the mountains."

Characters

Gertrude Flannery

Gertrude Flannery is a little girl who lives in the Weeds's neighborhood. She drifts from house to house, either making herself comfortable on other people's porches or walking right into their homes. Those who do not know Gertrude's family think her home life must be miserable, but her parents are actually attentive and caring. Gertrude stays away from home and wears ragged clothes as a form of rebellion. Neighbors have trouble getting rid of Gertrude because she generally ignores them when they tell her it is time to leave.

When Francis kisses Anne in his house's foyer, he is surprised to discover that Gertrude is standing right in the hallway. Gertrude never tells anyone what she has seen, which makes the reader wonder what else the child may have seen in the neighborhood. Her character is significant for this reason: the residents of Shady Hill keep up appearances, yet Gertrude probably knows many of the residents' secrets.

Donald Goslin

Donald Goslin is one of the Weeds' s neighbors. He plays his piano in the evenings, usually selecting "Moonlight Sonata." He plays it at his own tempo rather than strictly following the sheet music.

Dr. Herzog

Dr. Herzog is the psychiatrist whom Francis visits toward the end of the story. After seeing Francis for a week, Dr. Herzog convinces him that he (Francis) needs a distraction to serve as therapy. He suggests woodworking, which Francis seems to enjoy.

Maid

At a party, Francis recognizes the maid on duty. He recalls an incident during the war in which a French woman who has lived with a German officer is publicly humiliated by having her head shaved and then being stripped naked. He realizes that the maid is the woman he remembers. Although little is told about the maid's character, Francis's memories of her indicate that she is proud yet vulnerable.

Anne Murchison

Anne is the Weeds's new babysitter. She reveals to Francis that she is unhappy because of her home life; her father is an alcoholic.

Although Francis becomes obsessed with Anne, she seems oblivious to the magnitude of his feelings. When he kisses her, she resists, but nothing else is said about her reaction. Francis learns from Clayton that he and Anne plan to marry when she finishes high school.

Mr. Nixon

Mr. Nixon is one of the Weeds' s neighbors. He has a bird-feeding area in his backyard and yells at the squirrels every evening.

Miss Rainey

Miss Rainey is Francis's secretary. She sees a psychiatrist, Dr. Herzog, three times a week. Miss Rainey is a capable worker. When she is offered a better job, she tells Francis that she is quitting.

Clayton Thomas

Clayton is the son of one of the Weeds's neighbors. His father was killed in World War II, and now Clayton and his mother live alone. He attends college, but his mother is running out of money. He anticipates not being able to complete his education.

Clayton is honest, opinionated, cynical, and self-aware. He feels that he is still growing as a person and, thus, looks for opportunities to strengthen his character.

Clayton is the only character in the story who calls the people of Shady Hill "phony." He believes that they spend too much time perpetuating their own myth of perfection, so he is happy that he and his mother plan to leave soon. He plans to leave school, find a job in New York, and move there with his mother. He also plans to marry Anne when she finishes high school.

Francis Weed

Francis Weed is the protagonist of the story. The reader meets him as he is aboard an airplane that is making an emergency crash landing. After he survives the landing, he is a changed man. He is more impulsive and less inhibited. He says what he thinks, indulges in fantasies about the babysitter, and acts imprudently.

Although his marriage to Julia is comfortable, Francis becomes obsessed with a new teenaged babysitter, Anne. He buys her a bracelet (but never gives it to her), imagines where he will take her when it comes time to drive her home, and impulsively kisses her. He tells himself that he is in love with her, but he also feels guilty for wanting to abandon his family to be with her. His fantasies about the girl cause him to act selfishly, as when he undermines the job search of Clayton, Anne's fiancé.

Despite his fantasy world, Francis seems committed to maintaining his life as it is. When his wife threatens to leave, he talks her out of it, and he ultimately decides to see a psychiatrist to help him deal with his feelings for Anne. Francis seems to be having trouble adjusting to the lifestyle he has chosen for himself. Although he is dissatisfied with the superficial world in which he lives, he seems to prefer it to the unknown.

Helen Weed

Helen is the oldest child of Francis and Julia. She is an adolescent who is going through a stage in which she is unimpressed, distant, and jaded.

Henry Weed

Henry is the older son of Francis and Julia. He and Louisa are about the same age and enjoy antagonizing each other.

Julia Weed

Julia is Francis's wife. She is a homemaker who feels that her husband does not fully appreciate her. Julia is very involved in the community's social life and is popular with the Weeds's circle of friends. The story's narrator comments that "her love of parties sprang from a most natural dread of chaos and loneliness." This insight suggests that Julia is not fulfilled by her role as a wife and mother.

Julia becomes exasperated with the changes she sees in her husband after the plane accident. She feels he is becoming hostile and chides his rude behavior. Her attitude reflects how she values her social standing over understanding the ramifications of her husband's near-death experience.

Louisa Weed

Louisa is the younger daughter of Francis and Julia. She and Henry are about the same age, so they are competitive and argue with each other.

Toby Weed

Toby is the youngest child of Francis and Julia. He is preschool-aged and is very attached to his mother.

Mrs. Wrightson

Mrs. Wrightson is an established member of the Shady Hill community. She is older than Francis and is very hurt when he insults her at the train station. As a result of this snub, she excludes the Weeds from her anniversary party.

Themes

Appearances

In "The Country Husband," Cheever shows that appearances do not necessarily reflect reality. The people of Shady Hill, including the Weeds, maintain an illusion of happiness and control. Francis endures a life-threatening experience, yet outwardly, life goes on as before. During a party hosted by a married couple named Farquarson, Francis recognizes the maid as a woman he saw in France during the war. He remembers that she was publicly humiliated for living with a German officer, yet he never considers sharing her story with any of the other guests because "[t]he people in the Farquarsons' living room seemed united in their tacit claim that there had been no past, no war—that there was no danger or trouble in the world."

Francis knows that life in Shady Hill means keeping up appearances. He doesn't like this practice but he goes along with it. He begins to lose some of his inhibitions, however, after his near-death experience. Thinking about his lifestyle, he has certain regrets; the narrator explains, "Among his friends and neighbors, there were brilliant and gifted people—he saw that—but many of them, also, were bores and fools, and he had made the mistake of listening to them all with equal attention." Clayton is the only resident of Shady Hill who openly criticizes the culture of the community. Francis seems to envy Clayton because he is planning to leave Shady Hill to make a life elsewhere, and because he plans to marry Anne.

Second Chances

Surviving the crash landing gives Francis a sense that he has a second chance to live his life and that he can live it differently. Almost immediately, he indulges in inappropriate fantasies about the teenaged babysitter and speaks rudely to Mrs. Wrightson. In doing so, he appears to feel that he is being true to himself rather than playing the social games expected of him.

His wife, Julia, is a kind and decent person, but the marriage lacks connection and passion. In the spirit of second chances, Francis fixates on Anne, imaging that a sexual relationship with her will make him feel alive. He tells himself (and his psychiatrist) that he is in love with her, but he is really in love with the idea of youth and a promising future.

When Francis speaks rudely to Mrs. Wrightson, he feels energized for having said exactly what was on his mind without regard for the consequences. As she walks away, Francis feels liberated:

A wonderful feeling enveloped him, as if light were being shaken about him. . . . The realization of how many years had passed since he had enjoyed being deliberately

impolite sobered him. . . . He was grateful to the girl [Anne], for this bracing sensation of independence.

In the end, Francis is seemingly content again. He is changed as a result of his ordeal in the airplane but not in the way he expected, which was to live boldly and selfishly. Ironically, his decision to embrace his second chance leads him not to an exciting new life but to the same life with the addition of a new, home-based hobby: woodworking. He is still a conventional man living in American suburbia.

Style

Complex Narrative Style

At the beginning of the story, the narrator describes with detachment the airplane's near-crash. The narrator communicates facts rather than capturing the intensity of human crisis. As the story unfolds, however, the narrator enters Francis's mind, telling the reader about his thoughts and feelings. The result is that the reader finishes the story with the sense that the airplane incident is not particularly engrossing, but the character's reaction to it is. The narrator begins as a passive observer but becomes a commentator who frequently interprets the changes that take place in Francis.

One of the first insights into Francis's psyche is revealed when he sees Anne. Francis is drawn to her innocence, purity, and youth, as the narrator relates:

All those endearing flaws, moles, birthmarks, and healed wounds were missing, and he experienced in his consciousness that moment when music breaks glass, and felt a pang of recognition as strange, deep, and wonderful as anything in his life.

The narrator's intimate knowledge of Francis's inner experiences is shown in minor incidents, too. After Francis insults Mrs. Wrightson, for example, the narrator tells the reader, "Even the smell of ink from his morning paper honed his appetite for life, and the world that was spread out around him was plainly a paradise." Without this insight, the reader might only see Francis reading his paper and have no idea that the smell of the ink makes him feel alive or that he perceives his setting as perfect. Similarly, the narrator reveals Francis's feelings of guilt. In one episode, he is in his office thinking about Anne, when [t]he photograph of his four children laughing into the camera on the beach at Gay Head reproached him. On the letterhead of his firm there was a drawing of the Laocoön [a Hellenistic sculpture of the priest who angered and was punished by the goddess Athena for warning the Trojans not to accept the Greek horse], and the figure of the priest and his sons in the coils of the snake appeared to him to have the deepest meaning.

Simile

Throughout "The Country Husband" the narrator uses similes to describe Francis's inner and outer experiences. The similes show that Francis's perceptions of his world and of himself change. The world becomes a more engaging place where elements are interrelated and where feelings are sometimes intense. When Donald, a neighbor, begins his usual playing of "Moonlight Sonata," the narrator says it is

like an outpouring of tearful petulance, lonesomeness, and self-pity—of everything it was Beethoven's greatness not to know. The music rang up and down the streets like an appeal for love, for tenderness, aimed at some lovely housemaid—some fresh-faced, homesick girl from Galway, looking at old snapshots in her third-room floor.

Cheever uses these similes in at least three ways. Besides bringing the moment to life for the reader, he proj ects Francis' s feelings of longing into the music, and he also provides foreshadowing in the image of the young servant girl. Francis's idealized image of this Irish servant contrasts with his recognition of the maid whom he remembers as having been humiliated during the war.

In other passages, Cheever uses brief similes. The narrator comments that Anne's "perfection stunned him like a fine day—after a thunderstorm." And after the insult to Mrs. Wrightson, "The sky shone like enamel." These similes show how the plane crash affects Francis's subsequent interpretation of experience.

Historical Context

1950s America

During the 1950s, the United States experienced dramatic social change. World War II had ended. Men returned home from the war changed by their experiences yet eager to begin new chapters in their lives. They came home to their families and took over as the traditional heads of their households. Some took advantage of the G.I. Bill, which offered financial aid for college tuition to those who had served in the war, while others resumed their previous careers. Women, who during the war had occupied jobs formerly performed by men, were expected to return to their domestic family duties. Children had been born and/or had grown up while their fathers were away, which often made family adjustments difficult and awkward.

At the same time, it was an era of swelling patriotism and hope for the future. The United States came out of the war victorious, and the use of atomic bombs in Japan was believed to have secured America's place as a global superpower. However, the introduction of nuclear weapons also inspired fear and anxiety. Although the United States was the only nation to use nuclear weapons in the war, other countries possessed nuclear capability. In preparation for what many considered an inevitable nuclear war, many Americans built bomb shelters for their families. The Cold War, an era of struggle and suspicion between the United States and the Soviet Union, began. Distrust gave rise to McCarthyism (a political stance opposed to subversive elements and involving personal attacks on individuals without substantial evidence), which intended to get rid of communist influences. Unfortunately, the results were disastrous and led to the persecution of innocent people.

On the surface, the 1950s were a light-hearted, innocent time of poodle skirts, sock hops (school dances), hula hoops, and the emergence of rock and roll music. The economy boomed, and new appliances and conveniences for the home made middle-class life more comfortable.

Suburban Life

Suburbia expanded in the 1950s, as large numbers of single-family homes were built on small tracts of land to accommodate post-war affluence and the baby boom. Life in the suburbs reflected the desire of families to get out of crowded urban areas and enjoy a more relaxed pace as well as to own at least a small piece of land.

Those who worked outside the home faced a daily commute into the city where there was a higher concentration of office buildings, manufacturing facilities, and job opportunities. Evenings and weekends were often taken up with activities such as golf, gardening, card-playing, community organizations, church events, and children's sports and recitals.

Many residents of suburbs, however, felt pressed to conform to an idealized concept of suburban life. The media often portrayed life in the suburbs as a near-utopian existence in which everyone was friendly, social life was vibrant, and people were carefree. The reality, however, rarely met those expectations. Writers such as Cheever and John Updike sought to reveal the emptiness that many suburbanites felt.

Critical Overview

Since its publication, "The Country Husband" has been praised by critics. The story has received particular attention for its portrayal of suburban life. In *The American Short Story: Continuity and Change, 1940-1975,* author William Peden deems "The Country Husband" "one of the best of Cheever's excursions into the suburbia." Calling the story "a minor masterpiece of contemporary fiction," Robert A. Hipkiss in *Studies in Short Fiction* encourages the reader to consider "how much of the upper-middle-class suburban *angst* it includes." He explains that the story portrays the struggle between the individual and the community that focuses on issues concerning conventionality, making peace with the past in favor of a better future. Because Francis is portrayed within the context of the suburbs, he makes an unusual protagonist. Robert G. Collins comments on this point in *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature:*

This protagonist looked as if he had little future other than taking up an anesthetizing hobby; yet, he would become the literal alien, the man who moved out of his skin, that restricting and soiled garment, and drifted into new worlds searching for a real image to correspond with his continuing need.

"The Country Husband" is often commended for its underlying complexity. Cheever introduces many elements in the story, yet they work together to create the larger picture of Francis Weed's world. In *Studies in Short Fiction,* Lawrence Jay Dressner observes:

This story may indeed be seen as a marvel of structured complexity; its multitudinous elements, so casually "thrown together," come to be seen not as random but as essential elements of an intricately organized structure, an aesthetic object, a work of art. . . . [T]he story's ending, in which a number of earlier characters and themes are briefly remembered and loose ends are deftly tied up one after another in rapid succession, is the most dramatic display of the story's presumed unity in variety. . . .

Dressner, along with other critics, also praises Cheever's use of imagery. He comments that the story "repeatedly expresses, through imagery, incident, and diction, a tension between the domestic and the wild. The wild is figured as free, heroic, powerful, large-souled, and masculine, the domestic as confined, cowardly, weak, petty, and feminine." Hipkiss remarks that Cheever uses "the types of images that create the richness of emotional awareness for the reader as he comes to know Francis Weed's Shady Hill. These types are the images of war, myth, music, and nature." He adds,

It is the imagery of the story . . . that makes us realize just how rooted in our humanity and our American value system Francis Weed's fate really is. This story is Cheever's art at its most intense and elegant best.

While James O'Hara of *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Volume 102, *American Short-Story Writers, 1910-1945* praises Cheever's use of language, he finds it problematic in the last line of the story: "Then it is dark; it is a night where kings in golden suits ride

elephants over the mountains." O'Hara explains that this allusion to James Hilton's famous 1933 novel, *Lost Horizon,* with its mountain journey to the otherworldly paradise Shangri-La

is, in itself, a beautiful closing line, lifting the reader's gaze from the printed page into a shimmering vision of Shangrila [sic]. It is also, unfortunately, a neat and easy way of ducking the problems of Francis's consciousness and future, and thus it indirectly calls attention both to the limitations of the short story as a narrative form and Cheever's own powers as a practitioner.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, Bussey compares John Cheever's 1954 story, "The Country Husband," with the 1999 American film, American Beauty.

One of John Cheever's most anthologized stories, "The Country Husband," is a depiction of life in the American suburbs in the 1950s. The depiction is not flattering, as the main character, Francis Weed, feels empty and unfulfilled in his superficial world of parties and pleasantries. Similarly, the 1999 American film, *American Beauty,* depicts a middle-aged suburban man, Lester Burnham, who finds his life unsatisfying. Both Francis and Lester have come to a crisis although they have come by very different paths. Francis has survived a near-death experience. Lester has reached the boiling point via what is today understood as a mid-life crisis. The ways in which these two men respond to their crises are similar, but the outcomes are very different.

Cheever's work is often commended for its ability to speak to generations of readers. The themes, subjects, and characters continue to be relevant because Cheever finds the universality in his characters' situations. This relevance is certainly seen in "The Country Husband"; the modern-day Lester in *American Beauty* is in many ways an updated version of the same character. Both men decide to change after allowing themselves to be trapped in unsatisfying, conventional lives. In each case, the desire for change becomes focused on a teenaged girl. For Francis, it is his new babysitter, Anne; for Lester, it is his daughter's friend, a cheerleader named Angela.

The ways in which the two men eventually release their fantasies, however, are very different. Francis seeks psychiatric help to deal with his feelings. The psychiatrist recommends woodworking as a hobby to distract him (which seems ultimately doomed to address the core problem that led to Francis's obsession with the girl). Lester, on the other hand, lets go of his fantasies through the choice not to act on them. This is one of the ways in which *American Beauty* is a decidedly modern take on Cheever's story. While Anne would never approach Francis for sex, Angela attempts to seduce Lester. Realizing that Angela is inexperienced, however, Lester comes to see her as she is—a young, naïve girl. To go through with his fantasies would be to take advantage of her, and he cannot do it.

Another important similarity is that both men live in suburbia. The portrayal of the surface of this lifestyle is largely unchanged from the 1950s, when Cheever's story takes place. Although *American Beauty* is set almost fifty years later, the two neighborhoods appear basically the same on the outside. People are superficially friendly to one another other, men mow their lawns, women work in their gardens, children play outside, and residents are expected to present themselves a certain way. But in both cases, there is much more going on below the surface than is evident. Francis and Lester know that there is ugliness below the surface, and they are both frustrated by everyone else's refusal to acknowledge it. They are also, at least initially,

unwilling to act as nonconformists. When they decide to rebel, they do so in very different ways. While Francis acts out by making rude remarks to one of the neighborhood ladies, Lester rashly quits his job, intentionally choosing a permanent change. He happily goes home and acts like an adolescent, refusing responsibility and later taking a job at a fast-food restaurant.

The problems beneath the pristine suburban surfaces in these two stories seem to be quite different, too, although Cheever never tells much about the neighbors' lives. In "The Country Husband," the problems seem to be isolation and loneliness (as with the piano player and the neighbor yelling at the squirrels) and hidden marital strife. In *American Beauty,* however, the problems are even more disturbing. The Burnhams' new neighbors are a family in which the son is a drug-dealing peeping Tom who likes to videotape the Burnhams' teenaged daughter, and the father is a strict retired military man whose intense prejudice against homosexuals belies his attraction to men.

Comparing these two stories is important because their similarities demonstrate what has become a reality of American life. Life in the suburbs is not—never was—the utopian dream it once seemed. Further, people living in the suburbs seem no more likely to own up to their own flaws than they were in the 1950s. What is also telling is the differences in the two stories. Besides the differences in the ways in which Francis and Lester rebel, the ways in which they resolve their fantasies, and the types of problems found behind closed doors, these stories have starkly different endings. "The Country Husband" ends with Francis happily making a coffee table. He is pursuing his new hobby in hopes of forgetting about Anne and leading a normal life again. In *American Beauty,* Lester is murdered by the next-door neighbor. Interestingly, the scenes leading up to this denouement suggest that nearly everyone close to Lester is capable of this act. Both stories are disturbing, but in different ways. Cheever' s can be interpreted as hopeful, with Francis rehabilitated to stable suburban life by simply getting a hobby. (Francis's rehabilitation can also be interpreted as his failure to escape bland conventionality.) Lester's flouting of suburban convention leads to his violent death. These dramatic differences indicate that the dark underbelly of American suburbia has grown much darker and that the consequences of rebellion have become much more severe.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on "The Country Husband," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Dessner explores domesticity and gender roles in Cheever's "The Country Husband."

On more than one occasion, John Cheever described his short story "The Country Husband" (1954) with uncharacteristic satisfaction. In a 1973 interview, he spoke of the "seizure of lunacy when everything comes together. That is, of course, the most exciting thing about writing. I totally despair [and then] observations, emotions, and so forth all of a sudden calcify." A moment later Cheever called to mind an instance of this apogee of his experience of his art:

There is a short story of mine called "The Country Husband," which closes with something like seventeen images, including a dog with a hat in his mouth, I believe, and a railroad train, and a star, and a cat wearing a dress, and a man and his wife, and so forth. They are all sort of thrown together, and it's quite marvelous. It is one of the most exciting things that can happen to anybody, I think . . . I must admit it's very exciting. I run out of the room saying "Look! Look!"

This story may indeed be seen as a marvel of structured complexity; its multitudinous elements, so casually "thrown together," come to be seen not as random but as essential elements of an intricately organized structure, an aesthetic object, a work of art. While the story's ending, in which a number of earlier characters and themes are briefly remembered and loose ends are deftly tied up one after another in rapid succession, is the most dramatic display of the story's presumed unity in variety, its themes are echoed and repeated in variation and parody throughout its 10,600 words. Indeed, "A miniature novel" is what Vladimir Nabokov found it, "beautifully traced, so that the impression of there being a little too many things happening in it is completely redeemed by the satisfying coherence of its thematic underlacings" (Nabokov). Although the story has been repeatedly anthologized and is often described with admiration (Waldeland, Morace, Hunt), neither the extent nor the coherence of its "thematic underlacings" have been critically examined in a deconstructive reading that questions its structural and ideological unity, the foundational assumptions of its binary oppositions, a reading that asks: What is this work hiding? What is *in* this well-wrought urn?

"The Country Husband" is structured as an elegant comedy, a farce with slapstick's precise coincidental timing. Many of its characters survive ominous but in the event harmless perils. The reiterated motif of narrow escapes leads readers to disregard those elements of the story that do not match or complement the pattern, structure guiding the hermeneutic impulse. The story's central action, its most dramatic potential disaster, concerns Francis Weed, the eponymous protagonist, who resides with his wife and their children in the Cheeverian suburban of Shady Hill, and who falls desperately in love with Anne Murchison, their 18-year-old babysitter. Francis himself sees his infatuation as a potential disaster as it threatens him with "a trial for statutory rape" and puts in jeopardy his marriage and his family's standing in their hypocritically

unforgivingly moralistic community. In farce's exaggerated despair, he lists his alternatives: taking some physical exercise, religious confession, a Danish massage parlor, or "he could rape the girl or trust that he would somehow be prevented from doing this or he could get drunk." He chooses none of these, but no destructive consequences materialize— for him. Indeed, he finds "some true consolation" in the basement woodworking which a psychiatrist had recommended.

The comic dénouement of the story's central plot is echoed by a series of thematic counterparts. The story begins when "the airplane from Minneapolis in which Francis Weed was traveling East ran into heavy weather." The passengers variously cry, drink, contemplate their own mortality, and, whistling in the dark, sing; the plane lands safely, if violently, in a cornfield, and all aboard walk away unharmed. The passengers "filed out of the doors and scattered over the cornfield in all directions, praying that the thread would hold. It did. Nothing happened."

It is typical of Cheever's artistry that that thread is picked up, so to speak, some 20 pages later when we learn that Weed's "village hangs, morally and economically from a thread; but it hangs by its thread in the evening light." Such repetition of images, as of thematic patterns, gives comfort, or pleasure, perhaps because of the implication in the world of the literary work that we are under the care of a providential power, one that remembers and does not change, one that does not permit threads to break, chaos to come. Cheever's practice—any such practice—necessarily conflicts with language's inescapably problematic relationship to the world to which it points, although seeing past the comforting allusions implied by balanced structures to those threads that indeed break requires the unusually critical attention that we now call deconstruction. Offered a circus full of obediently bouncing balls, if we are to see things clearly, we need to watch carefully for the balls that do not bounce.

Near the story's end, there is a parodic version of Weed's harmless fall from the sky. Young Toby Weed, underweight and readily overtaken by tears, seeking in his child's way to change his life, recapitulates his father's crash landing:

. . . he goes to the closet and takes his space suit off a nail . . . He loops the magic cape over his shoulders and, climbing onto the footboard of his bed, he spreads his arms and flies the short distance to the floor, landing with a thump that is audible to everyone in the house but himself.

Audible, but without serious harm to body or soul. Nor was there real cause for fear when "Francis gave his name and address to [the psychiatrist's] secretary and then saw . . . a policeman moving toward him. 'Hold it, hold it,' the policeman said. 'Don't move. Keep your hands where they are.'" The policeman "began to slap Francis' clothes, looking for what—pistols, knives, an icepick?" The supposed danger disappears and is explained with farce's straight-faced directness: "Finding nothing, [the policeman] went off and the secretary began a nervous apology: 'When you called on the telephone, Mr. Weed, you seemed very excited, and one of the doctor's patients has been threatening his life, and we have to be careful.'"

In this instance, the pattern of the comic, of the harmless and risible escape, deflects attention from the psychiatrist's other patient and his harrowing rage. Similarly trivialized into laughter and the aesthetic pleasure of repetition had been young Toby's unredeemed desperation and Weed's option of "rap[ing] the girl." There is no comic reduction of the plight of Francis Weed himself: "It was his life, his boat, and, like every other man, he was made to be the father of thousands, and what harm could there be in a tryst that would make them both feel more kindly toward the world?" Neither Francis nor the narrator of his story dwell on the needs or pains of others. Anne Murchison, the woman in question, as Weed well knows, is engaged to be married, nor does he have any reason to expect that she would welcome such a "tryst," but Anne's function is limited to serving Weed's "love" and Cheever's art.

The paradigm of "heavy weather," of threat, from which no harm ensues is repeated in the lives of minor characters, human, animal, and even vegetable. Jupiter, a neighbor's retriever, is, like Francis, "an anomaly," "out of place in Shady Hill." Of irrepressible high spirits, he cannot resist mischief. He goes where he pleases, "ransacking wastebaskets, clotheslines, garbage pails, and shoe bags." Consequently, "Jupiter's days were numbered", but at the story's end Jupiter takes his place in the parade of similarly anomalous survivors of Shady Hill's infamous propriety: "He prances through the tomato vines, holding in his generous mouth the remains of an evening slipper." A delicious slipper, no doubt, and who would spoil the neatly-structured party by inquiring after its inconvenienced owner?

"Sunk in spiritual and physical discomfort," a "miserable" unnamed cat wanders into the story's closing parade and reprise of characters and themes. An anonymous keeper of the decorum thought necessary within the bounds of Shady Hill has covered the cat's unseemly nakedness and figuratively contained its proverbial propensity to libidinous expression: "Tied to its head is a small straw hat—a doll's hat—and it is securely buttoned into a doll's dress, from the skirts of which protrudes its long, hairy tail." Like Francis himself, like Nora in *A Doll's House,* the cat has been tamed and "buttoned" "securely," its sexuality made domestic if not childish, but, visible below this doll's dress is the hairy, phallic, protrusion whose presence signals a failed emasculation, another triumphant survival of an ostensible disaster.

In an early passage that embodies the story's essential paradigm, and whose imagery is also linked, tonally and thematically, to its closing page, Weed, and/or his narrator, notice the threatened but surviving flowers at Anne's home. Hand in hand they "went up a narrow walk through a front garden where dahlias, marigolds, and roses—things that had withstood the light frosts—still bloomed, and made a bittersweet smell in the night air." The weather threatened, but at least for the time being, the succinct fact here, as at the opening airplane crash, is that "Nothing happened", "things" survived. The marriage of Francis and Julia Weed survives the husband's temptation and the wife's supposed failings. Indeed, Julia never learns of the bracelet Francis bought for Anne, and when Francis forces Anne into an embrace, her struggle is interrupted, luckily for him, by the presence of little Gertrude Flannery, whose silence Weed purchases cheaply. True to the farce tradition, no sooner does Gertrude exit than Julia's voice is heard calling Francis to come upstairs to dress for that evening's party. The marriage survives as well

the argument that develops when Julia discovers that her husband has insulted Mrs. Wrightson, Shady Hill's social arbiter: "'Damn you, Francis Weed!' Julia cried, and the spit of her words struck him in the face." Francis insists on his need to express his feeling; Julia argues for discretion and vigorously describes how their lives and their children's lives would be diminished without acceptance into the social life of their community. Francis "did something then that was, after all, not so unaccountable, since her words seemed to raise up between them a wall so deadening that he gagged. He struck her full in the face. She staggered and then, a moment later, seemed composed."

Although Cheever's narrator does what he can to justify Francis's action, Julia announces she is leaving. As she packs a suitcase, tersely, Francis apologizes and assures her of his love. Julia accuses him of "subconscious" cruelty to her. She sobs. Both argue with increasing vehemence. Dissolution if not disaster seems at hand; but when she announces her departure, Francis bursts out with "Oh, my, darling, I can't let you go!" He takes her into his arms, and the threat immediately disappears. Blandly, as if suddenly awakened from a dream she has already forgotten, Julia says, "I guess I'd better stay and take care of you for a little while longer." No motivation for Julia's shocking *volte-face* is supplied, but its suddenness, its coming at the crucial, the very last moment, the mildness of its irony, and its completeness in putting an end to the threat, allow it to be readily drawn into the farce pattern of narrowly escaped disasters. The scene displays Julia to be tied to provincial and conventional thinking, meanly vindictive, foolish, and astonishingly weak-willed, but this repetition of the story's thematic pattern suppresses any nascent sympathy for the ordeals to which she has been subjected.

In addition to its structural use of the farcically narrow escape, "The Country Husband" repeatedly expresses, through imagery, incident, and diction, a tension between the domestic and the wild. The wild is figured as free, heroic, powerful, large-souled, and masculine, the domestic as confined, cowardly, weak, petty, and feminine. While the wild is preferable, the domestic is seen as necessary, civilization's regrettable but inescapable emasculation. The military, in which masculine freedom and power is regimented, ordered, controlled, is made a middle term between these poles.

Ridicule of domesticity, with varying degrees of scorn, often expresses the narrator's comic disappointment with a world out of joint, infected, as it were, with the tell-tale appearance of the feminine. Devoted to housekeeping and to assuring the family's social acceptance, Julia herself is an epitome of the domestic. She taunts her husband with what, to her, remains a crucial shortcoming. At their wedding, years ago: "And how many of your friends came to the church? Two!" Her husband's habit of dropping his clothes, "all over the floor where they drop", had become intolerable to her. Domesticity is gently mocked when the narrator notices in the interior of the airplane that crashes "the shaded lights, the stuffiness, and the window curtains [which] gave the cabin an atmosphere of intense and misplaced domesticity." Later the waiting room of Weed's psychiatrist's office is

a crude token gesture toward the sweets of domestic bliss: a place arranged with antiques, coffee tables, potted plants, and etchings of snow-covered bridges and geese

in flight, although there were no children, no marriage bed, no stove, even, in this travesty of a house, where no one had ever spent the night and where the curtained windows looked straight onto a dark air shaft.

Among the thematically related participants of our story's concluding parade is Gertrude Flannery, who is defined and exhausted by her Dickensian attribute, her refusal to "go home." The child's clothing is "ragged and thin," and she herself is "skinny . . . and unwashed." "She never went home of her own choice." Gertrude's repudiation of the domestic hearth is not, however, a response to any insufficiency of domestic comfort or kindness. Like Francis Weed and his avatars—although she is female—Gertrude too "had been born with a taste for exploration, and she did not have it in her to center her life with her affectionate parents." That she is female adds spice to the story's satiric rejection of Shady Hill's conventional domesticity and the femininity associated with it. While Cheever's approved male figures reject domesticity as a matter of course, this female who does so is seen as a droll sport, a paradoxical freak.

It is Mrs. Wrightson's insistent interest in her difficulties in purchasing curtains for her living-room windows that evokes Weed's bluntest expression of his preference for masculine freedom over the domestic narrowness of the feminine. Shady Hill's leading society matron and Weed, its potential "leper," in Julia's phrase, meet at the commuter railroad platform. The woman chatters away about her living room windows: "You can imagine what a problem they present. I don't know what to do with them." Her companion can stand it no more:

"I know what to do with them," Francis said . . . "Paint them black on the inside, and shut up." There was a gasp from Mrs. Wrightson, and Francis looked down at her to be sure that she knew he meant to be rude. She turned and walked away from him, so damaged in spirit that she limped. A wonderful feeling enveloped him . . .

Weed's counter to Mrs. Wrightson's conventionally feminine and trivial concern for interior decoration incorporate the same conventionally masculine interests echoed through the story, black-out curtains being both the least decorative, least domestic, of all possible curtains, and an appurtenance of warfare.

No wonder Weed feels triumphant as Mrs. Wrightson limps away! He has confronted his community's icon of respectable domesticity with his habitual resource, the spirit of machismo and manly camaraderie in its most concentrated form, war. Not a page in "The Country Husband" is without at least one explicit mention of war or battle, or a metaphor or allusion in which the idea is made present. Some of these references occur in the narrator's voice, others in Weed's voice or in indirect dialogue; some occur in that ambiguous terrain where the minds of the narrator and the protagonist— and even the implied author or Cheever himself— cannot be distinguished. Just as Cheever as author creates the twists and turns of the story's plot that suit Weed's desires, privileging and marginalizing characters and traits as Weed would do himself, so does Cheever as narrator give expression to Weed's reliance on the language and imagery of war. In effect, Cheever, or the implied author, "Cheever," is both the narrator and the

protagonist of "The Country Husband," which is in effect a first-person account, related in the third person.

The first reference to war and its camaraderie occurs as Weed's plane heads for its crash-landing. Its pilot "could be heard singing faintly, 'I've got sixpence, jolly, jolly sixpence . . .'" That an airplane pilot's voice should indeed be heard, however faintly, in the cabin of a commercial airliner, is not easy to credit, but the moment's and the song's connection with military camaraderie is quite conventional. When the passengers are led from the downed plane to "a string of taxis," an anonymous observer reinforces the military parallel when he says: "It's just like the Marne." While Cheever's personal war was World War II, the story's references conflate a variety of military conflicts. The Weed household's domestic tranquility is such that when Julia Weed asks her children to wash their hands for dinner, "this simple announcement, like the war cries of the Scottish chieftains, only refreshes the ferocity of the combatants." When asked to go upstairs to fetch his daughter, "Francis is happy to go; it is like getting back to headquarters company", the military refuge of the shirker of duty and risk. Julia's "guns are loaded" for the coming argument with her husband, who speaks of his home as a "battlefield." She repeats the metaphor in denying it and then the narrator, speaking for Francis, repeats it twice. In a moment of nostalgic reflection, Francis recalls a family outing and asking a bagpiper to play "a battle song of the Black Watch." Toby Weed, conflating the Lone Ranger's gunplay with Buck Rogers, changes into his space suit from a cowboy outfit, complete with "silver bullets and holsters." Cheever's supposed desire to engage in combat with his infantry unit, becomes Francis Weed's memory that he *has* served and is transformed into the story's repeated references to wars American and foreign, contemporary, legendary, and historical, indeed, to a fantastic amalgam of masculine military imagery.

Francis dreams of "crossing the Atlantic with [a transfigured version of Anne Murchison] on the old Mauretania." The "old" *Mauretania* was commissioned in 1907 and scrapped in 1935. It and its fated sister ship the *Lusitania,* were "the first Atlantic liners in which it was the invariable rule to dress for dinner in first class." Both ships were as fast as they were luxurious. Both had been designed to be convertible to military use. The first *Mauretania* was used to transport troops and the wounded. The second *Mauretania* was commissioned in 1939 and retired in 1965. She was used as a troop transport and after the war she carried prosperous and celebrated passengers, such as Lana Turner and her bridegroom. Weed's sexual fantasy is bathed in the composite, supposed glamour of high life, Hollywood, and the World War of his father's generation.

Neither the subtext in which masculine warfare's freedom and camaraderie contrasts with feminine domesticity nor the plot pattern in which farcical escape from danger dissolves pain into laughter always survive what seems the psychological needs of both the narrator and the implied author, or of that imagined composite the text tempts us to call Cheever/Weed. In two dramatic episodes those needs overpower the mode of the comic and override the neat balance of the male/female, free/domestic patterning. The first of these episodes concerns the new maid passing the drinks at the Farquarsons' dinner party. Weed recognizes her: A soldier on a three-day pass in the fictional French town of Trenon, he "had walked out to a crossroads to see the public chastisement of a

young woman who had lived with the German commandant during the Occupation." He remembers the formal accusation of the collaborator, her "empty half smile behind which the whipped soul is suspended," her skull shaved clean, her nakedness, her tears. The narrator lets Weed meditate on memory and war, themes "the atmosphere of Shady Hill made . . . unseemly and impolite." The French woman has survived her disgrace only to have become that most domestic of the domesticated, a domestic servant, literally, "a domestic." Five times in a page, the narrator refers to her as a "maid."

The French woman is like Weed in that both reject the constraints of social loyalties and responsibilities, but unlike him, she is pitied, not admired, for her independence and her assertion of her emancipation. Weed's recognition of her is rather the occasion for Weed to see himself as the suffering superior of his insensitive neighbors who "seemed united in their tacit claim that there had been no past, no war—that there was no danger or trouble in the world." The French woman has survived the disaster of rejection and punishment by her community, but there is no laughter at her remarkable transformation and escape into safety, no delight in her remembered rejection of her society's norms of behavior. Her rejection of the social contract parallels Weed's assault on Mrs. Wrightson, but such freedom from the constraints of community and family are in Francis's eyes available only to males. The French woman has survived, but only to serve cocktails and dinner in suburbia. Like Gertrude Flannery, her rejection of domesticity is not an occasion for admiration. It is rather a time for a vivid depiction of the denigration of a woman and the drawing of gender-based lines: rebellion is admirable when men do it. Women may be pitiable, as freaks or failures, but their unconventionality is not a badge of honor. The French woman does not have a place in the story's final parade in which "everything comes together," and Gertrude only appears there to be scolded for being away from home. The story's supposedly unifying and unified structure leaves these escapes, these selves, out of the celebration.

Seeing the French woman again at the Farquarsons' evokes Weed's fantasy, complexly intertwined with his memories of military service in Europe, of taking the *Mauretania* to Paris with the babysitter. This in turn prompts a vision of skiing, the activity he sought "that would injure no one" and that helps him "seek . . . with ardor some simplicity of feeling and circumstance." Weed's skiing on a "snow-covered mountain" is explicitly linked here with the primal relationships of man and nature and with "the mountains" of the story's last sentence: "Then it is dark; it is night where kings in golden suits ride elephants over the mountains." This imagery is in turn glossed by an explicit reference to Hannibal's Alpine exploits: the Weeds' host says of his wife: ". . . I still bite her shoulders. She makes me feel like Hannibal crossing the Alps." "The Country Husband" ends then with an allusion to the warrior who "ranks among those half-dozen great soldiers whose work broke down barriers and cleared the way for larger ideas of civilization." Mounted on elephants, his army crossed the Alps, outsmarting the Romans he outmaneuvered and outfought for many years, the thread holding, until he was forced by circumstances to abandon his position and his goal of conquest. The fabulous if unspecified "kings in golden suits" pick up the golden hair of a women who appears to Weed as an apparition, the color of the thread on which survival depends, and the gold of Toby Weed's pistol belt. But the multitudinous resonances of the dark night's parade

imply a completeness, an exhaustiveness, a moral and structural integrity, that the story's tacit ideological hierarchy lacks.

The other major discordant episode concerns Anne Murchison's fiancé Clayton Thomas. To make Weed's pain at his loss of Anne particularly grievous yet absurdly funny, her fiancé is a pompous and insolent puppy. Weed's encounter with Clayton does not lead to another narrow escape but to disaster for the younger man. Clayton, who comes by on an errand and stays to chat, is capable of saying: "I think people ought to be able to dream great dreams." His religion he says is: "Unitarian, Theosophist, Transcendentalist, Humanist." He "thought of making a retreat at one of the Episcopalian monasteries, but I don't like Trinitarianism." This embarrassing boy turns out to be Weed's successful rival, saying of Anne: "Oh, she's wonderful, Mr. and Mrs. Weed, and we have so much in common. We like all the same things. We sent out the same Christmas card last year without planning it, and we both have an allergy to tomatoes, and our eyebrows grow together in the middle." Clayton, however, is special in that he bears the scars of the unspeakable, of war. His "father had been killed in the war, and the young man's fatherlessness surrounded him like an element. This may have been conspicuous in Shady Hill because the Thomases were the only family that lacked a piece; all the other marriages were intact and productive."

No sooner is Clayton out the door than the argument begins that ends with Francis striking Julia. Soon thereafter Weed is asked by a friend of Clayton's impecunious mother to help her son find a job. Not only does Weed refuse the request, his damming characterization of young Clayton is patently unfair. Weed has his revenge. *This* thread has broken. The circle of those privileged to partake, without ironic denigration, of the special freedom from domesticity and conventionality associated with warfare has narrowed still further. It contains at last only the truly masculine: Francis Weed/John Cheever and those approved of by him, the dog Jupiter, and the unreconstructed cat.

"The Country Husband" ends, to Cheever's reported delight, on "a night where kings in golden suits ride elephants over the mountains." Francis Weed leaves the story not only as a survivor of potential disasters, but as a king and a great military hero. The last bricks of the story's "thematic underlacings" are slid into their elegantly appointed places. The joys of farce modulate to an equally satisfactory aesthetic calm, in the splendor of which the story's ideology and the unsatisfied needs and aspirations of others are forgotten, or present only in the fading memory of their punishments and marginalization.

When Francis Weed returns home after his airplane crashes, he finds his children "absorbed in their own antagonisms." "Francis makes the mistake of scolding Louisa for bad language before he punishes Henry," for which his daughter "accuses him of favoritism." "Damn you!" Louisa had cried, but, "just then," Julia entered, as if on cue, oblivious of the children's discontent, which immediately swelled into slapstick's domestic anarchy. Henry's well-earned punishment is forgotten in the comic confusion, but Francis finds time to harangue his other daughter for reading *True Romance.* "Damn you, Francis Weed!" Julia later cries, upset at his endangering the family's social acceptance in Shady Hill and his leaving his laundry for her to pick up as an expression

of his disdain for her. Again the reiterated curse is forgotten in the tumult of the farcical reconciliation. The "heavy weather" that threatens Francis Weed blows itself out in a gale of laughter. He reigns supreme, and alone, in a golden suit, riding an elephant.

Source: Lawrence Jay Dessner, "Gender and Structure in John Cheever' s 'The Country Husband, "' in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 31, No. 1, Winter 1994, pp. 57-68.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Hipkiss discusses the darker aspects of suburbia in Cheever's "The Country Husband."

"The Country Husband," John Cheever's 1950s story of the well-to-do suburb of Shady Hill, is a minor masterpiece of contemporary fiction. Consider how much of the upper-middle-class suburban *angst* it includes: the tension between the individual's emotional needs for personal, individualized recognition and the responsibilities he must exercise toward others; the brittle order of man-made conventions, undermined by the instinctive, chaotic selfishness of animal biology; the would-be hero's visions of an Elysian future fractured by the triphammer echoes of history; and, through it all, the terrible failure of human communication, with the resultant condemnation to loneliness and imprisoned desire of the imaginative suburbanite in an unimaginative land.

Cheever's studies of life at the apex of American middle-class culture are stories that depend less on plot than on images, and it is the mixture of the types of images that creates the richness of emotional awareness for the reader as he comes to know Francis Weed's Shady Hill. These types are the images of war, myth, music, and nature. They create in "The Country Husband" a prose-poem of broad dimensions and subtle intensity.

The war imagery begins with Francis Weed's fellow airplane passenger's reference to the Battle of the Marne after the plane has crash-landed in a cornfield. His attempt to develop conversation and an outlet for feelings after the life-threatening event is stifled, however, by "the suspiciousness with which many Americans regard their fellow travelers." Upon reaching home, Francis Weed enters a house that represents conquest in its Dutch Colonial exterior and its living room that is "divided like Gaul into three parts." Francis's competitive business success has earned him his colonial estate in Shady Hill, but, like Gaul, it will be hard to preserve. His encounter with the barbarians, his children, quickly shows his own lack of sovereignty. The call to dinner, "like the war cries of Scottish chieftains", increases the ferocity of the children. When his wife asks him to bring his daughter downstairs to dinner, he welcomes the chance to get away from the battle. Upset with the children's behavior at the table, he asks if they could not have their dinner earlier, only to find that Julia's "guns are loaded." He protests that he does not like coming home to a "battlefield" and finally retreats into the garden "for a cigarette and some air."

At the dinner party his own experiences in World War II are brought back to him dramatically by discovering that the serving maid is the same woman who had her head shaved and her body stripped naked by French villagers because she slept with the occupying German commandant. Once again, though, a reference to the barbarism in human nature is prohibited by the unspoken demand for blind belief in the invincibility of social order and decorum. "The people in the Farquarson's living room seemed united in their tacit claim that there had been no past, no war . . ." These are members of the successful upper middle class of our society, and they have sought and want at all costs

to believe that they have found in Shady Hill an untroubled paradise, the appropriate reward for their labor and intelligence according to the values of a properly regulated Protestant American universe.

Francis cannot help but feel that more is involved in his growing sense of isolation than the failure of communication and sexual connection between himself and his wife. It seems to him that the forces of disorder that he feels within him are also the very forces that threaten Shady Hill and civilization in general. When he insults Mrs. Wrightson by telling her to paint the inside of her curtains black, he is not only counterattacking her busybody conventionality but suggesting that Shady Hill defends itself from the bombardment of fresh emotions by a kind of wartime blackout, ironically not really foiling the enemy but using the only defense it really has, its refusal to see the light. Yet, like the brigadier in "The Brigadier and the Golf Widow," one of Cheever's later stories, although Francis may have a secret urge to see all of Shady Hill and its instinct-denying, nature-suppressing conventions blown to bits, he also recognizes that to give way to those warring impulses would be to destroy what he and the others of his class have so painstakingly created as a bulwark against the havoc that those forces can wreak. Julia makes that point so well that, unable to gainsay it, "he struck her full in the face."

At the close of another party in the endless rounds of talking and sipping that Julia has scheduled them into, the host squeezes his wife and says, "She makes me feel like Hannibal crossing the Alps." She gives him the man's necessary sense of conquest, although they have been married sixteen years. Sadly, all Francis can do is dream of such feelings, for his marriage has become an empty one of household arrangement, financial support, and the need to keep up appearances in order for the Weeds not to lose their social attractiveness. At the end of the story, after Francis has begun his woodworking therapy, we are told that it is a dark night (and in Cheever darkness is often the source of mysterious creation, of images that either threaten or console), "a night where kings in golden suits ride elephants over the mountains." Francis is at least free to dream of heroic conquest and sexual success. The romantic vision is his sole outlet for his frustrated, warring lust in conventional Shady Hill.

The war imagery emphasizes the brittleness of convention in containing the urges of the libido, man's drive to power and procreation. The mythological images suggest the fatal inevitability of the situation. As the passengers of the plane scatter in all directions across the cornfield, they pray that the thread will hold. The Fates have not fully spun that thread. Atropos is not ready to cut it. Later at a party, thinking of driving the babysitter home, Francis thinks the Fates are on his side: "The thought that he would drive Anne Murchison home later that night ran like a golden thread through the events of the party." After having his hopes dashed and realizing the futility of his idealized love of Anne Murchison, he visits a psychiatrist. A week or ten days later he is still a seemingly conventional householder in Shady Hill, but it is now described as a village that "hangs, morally and economically . . . by its thread in the evening light." The American Protestant order is precarious, but for a time it holds, and that must suffice for those who live there.

The emblem of lurking Satanic disorder in Shady Hill is the god of ungovernable appetite, heroic power, and intelligence, the black retriever, Jupiter. That this Jupiter is a dog, an animal associated more with Jupiter's son Mars than with the supreme deity of the Romans himself, merely emphasizes that the natural impulses of freedom and dissolution are stronger than man's insistence on order and construction.

Jupiter's first appearance comes as he is crashing through the tomato vines in the Weeds' garden with part of a felt hat in his mouth, acting as a scourge on order and decorum. We are told that "his retrieving instincts and high spirits were out of place in Shady Hill." He has an "intelligent" but "rakehell" face and the head of a heraldic symbol. He may be out of place in Shady Hill, but his lineage and type go back much further than most of that town's human pedigrees. The servants of the new aristocrats would soon poison him, Francis thinks, and immediately succeeds that thought with the vision of Julia blowing out the dinner candles in a parallel act of romantic defeat.

Those candles, incidentally, are six in number and were lit at the beginning of the Weeds' chaotic dinner at home after Francis's return from Minneapolis aboard the emergency-landed aircraft. He had returned to his home, "his creation," and found his wife lighting the six candles in a "vale of tears." Man was created on the sixth day, and the problems the Weeds face are peculiarly human problems, not to be solved by romantic dreaming.

Jupiter has his human counterpart in Gertrude, the little girl, characterized as a "stray." The best attempts of her parents to make her dress neatly and respect others' privacy go for naught because she was "born with a taste for exploration ..." Like Jupiter she retrieves objects (babies from cribs), and she is always where a person least expects to find her. She is witness to Francis's kissing the babysitter, much to his dismay, but, so far as we know, she never does tell anyone about it. She is, like a family dog, "helpful, pervasive, honest, hungry, and loyal."

It is Jupiter who has the last scene in the story, prancing through the tomato vines, endangering the order of the garden, with the remains of an evening slipper (memento of parties and romantic escape) in his generous (often hungry) mouth. Jupiter enforces the theme of inevitable and enduring romance, of man's appetite for adventure, conquest, and love, which will not be suppressed by the conventions of Shady Hill. So Francis still dreams in the end of Hannibal crossing the Alps.

In Shady Hill "things seemed arranged with more propriety than the Kingdom of Heaven." Passing the statue of Atlas on Fifth Avenue during a work day in the city, Francis thinks "of the strenu-ousness of containing his physicalness within the patterns he had chosen." Like Laocoön, who appears on the letterhead of his firm's stationery, he feels caught in the serpent's coils. The Trojan judge Laocoön broke an oath of celibacy to Apollo and later warned the Trojans not to accept the Greek gift of the wooden horse. Francis has been tempted to break the marriage vows and has also seen, perhaps too clearly for his own good, that the perfect order of Shady Hill is a kind of Trojan horse, an artifice that contains within its awesome structure the destructive, repressed desires of those denied their Hellenic queen. Serpents are also, biblically, the

age-old symbol of sexual desire, and Julia's substitution of manners and party-going for love that is private, "sweet and bawdy and dark" makes Francis ripe for adultery and the mental projection of an ideal love into the vulnerable look of Anne Murchison, the babysitter. His repression also causes him to mistake an older woman wearing glasses for Anne on the commuter train and gives him a vision of Venus passing through on a train past his platform.

After insulting Mrs. Wrightson, "he thought again of Venus combing and combing her hair as she drifted through the Bronx. The realization of how many years had passed since he had enjoyed being deliberately impolite sobered him." Some time afterward, Julia's response to his enjoyment is that he cannot expect to live "like a bear in a cave" as a resident of civilized Shady Hill unless he wants to be "a social leper." The goddess of love, rampant and free, is not permitted in Shady Hill. Moreover, Shady Hill expects its citizens to be accepting and kind toward one another without discrimination, and Francis is beginning to see that such a waste of self upon its many fools and bores makes his own life less meaningful and satisfying. As the use of myth suggests, Francis Weed's frustrations are both biological and social and part of the inevitable state of civilized mankind.

Along with the battle imagery and mythological references, Cheever provides periodic musical accompaniment, suggestive of Francis's and Shady Hill's unmet emotional needs. Music in the Weed home is specified by a Schubert waltz album set upon a polished piano rack, a part of the contrived *House Beautiful* setting that Julia has made of her living room. Music is first *heard* when Francis is in his garden after his "battlefield" dinner. The music consists of Donald Goslin's almost nightly performance of Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata," and as he plays it, it expresses "tearful petulance, lone-someness, and self-pity . . ." in short, Francis's own, feelings of the moment.

Julia too tries to escape loneliness, a key reason why the Weeds are such partygoers: ". . . if she had gone out seven nights a week, it would not have cured her of a reflective look—the look of someone who hears distant music," he music of another party somewhere else.

After the conventional dinner at the Farquarsons' and Francis's recognition of the servant as the woman humiliated at the crossroads during the war, the appearance of Anne Murchison in his own domicile gives him a pang of recognition of her beauty and need for love as sharp and pure as "when music breaks glass." Music here signifies the fullness of his need, the breaking point of his restraint, and the projection of his imagined fulfillment. That night he will dream of her "filling chamber after chamber with her light, her perfume, and the music of her voice." After insulting Mrs. Wrightson, the point after which he must either retreat once again into conventional behavior or develop the hardihood of the social renegade, he realizes that the girl's "music" might lead him to a trial for statutory rape and feels caught in Laocoön's serpent's coils. When the music becomes a subject for prosaic thought, it has certainly lost the overwhelming force of epiphany. The sharpness of his need is now blunted by psychiatric consultation and his busying himself with "simple arithmetic" and the "holy smell of new wood" as he builds his own crucifix—in his case, a coffee table. The music that he hears at the end is

that of Donald Goslin worrying the "Moonlight Sonata" once again. Francis has retreated, and convention has won, though he will still see in the darkness the vision of Hannibal crossing the Alps.

Throughout the story, in conjunction with allusions to war, myth, and music, nature imagery and its associated images of civilized containment develop the tension that Francis speaks of in the thematic passage where, upon seeing the statue of Atlas holding up the world, he "thought of the strenuousness of containing his physicalness within the patterns he had chosen."

We are told in the first paragraph, with the description of the plane flying into the cloud that was so dense it reflected the plane's exhaust fires, that Francis had been in heavy weather before but never shaken up so much. The entire story is one of "heavy weather" for this frustrated, middle-aged suburbanite. The clouds reflect his own exhausting fires of middle age as he sits looking at them. The opposition of those fires to his own domestic situation is set forth in this scene, where we are told the exhaust fires blazed outside (among the natural elements of which fire is normally a part) while inside the plane "the shaded lights, the stuffiness, and the window curtains gave the cabin an atmosphere of intense and misplaced domesticity." Curtains here suggest the willful, self-blinding artifice civilized man uses to shut away the vision of nature that threatens him. Here that vision reflects man's exhausting energies in an indifferent gray world. Curtains also perform the same service, or disservice, in the psychiatrist's office where they screen from view the void of the air shaft and screen *in* to the patient's view a waiting room that is a hollow representation of domestic bliss. Moreover, as indicated earlier, when he tells Ms. Wrightson what to do with her curtains, he is telling her that what Shady Hill curtains out is even mere threatening than it supposes.

After the plane makes its landing in the cornfield, the corn and, later, the slum gardens ready for harvest show a fecundity that completely opposes Francis's recent recognition of his own nearness to death. At home the late summer sunlight is "clear as water." There are roses on the piano and the smells from the kitchen are appetizing. His senses have been made keen by the overall experience, but the roses are only part of the decorative scheme in the living room, and the dinner is not enjoyed.

The gardens of Shady Hill are, like Julia's roses, an attempt to contain nature for private enjoyment in a restrained way. But like the Garden of Eden these gardens have their invaders. Jupiter crashes through the tomato vines in the Weeds' garden and through the roses in Mr. Nixon's. The squirrels haunt Mr. Nixon's bird-feeding station as well, causing him to cry out at this long-lived depredation in the fashion of a character in a morality play, cursing one of the Seven Deadly Sins or perhaps the Devil himself: "Rapscallions! Varmints! Avaunt and quit my sight!"

After insulting Mrs. Wrightson, Francis feels thankful to Anne Murchison "for this bracing sensation of independence." Although it is only a sensation, and one that will be short-lived at that, the birds sing and "the sky shone like enamel." Even the smell of ink on the morning paper invigorates him. He knows he is probably undergoing "an autumnal love of middle age," but that categorization does not diminish his feeling of arousal, of being

now, for the moment at least, a healthy animal, ready to gratify his lust, expressing his feelings, sensorily and sensually awake at last.

The very next paragraph, however, puts a damper on the high spirits he describes. His secretary, Miss Rainey (like Francis's own the name is suggestive), sees a psychiatrist three mornings a week, and he wonders what a psychiatrist would say to him. His thoughts lead then to thought of legal censure and his own Laocoön-like situation. The would-be satyr finds himself contained within the social codes, and the scene shifts from sporting in the woods to the interior of his office with its reproaching photograph of his own children and the Laocoön letterhead.

The "moral card house" almost comes tumbling down upon him when he finds Anne in his house when he gets home. Once again her appeal is equated with nature's wholesome beauty: "Her smile was open and loving. Her perfection stunned him like a fine day—a day after a thunderstorm." Then he is seen kissing Anne, but it is Gertrude who sees, and Gertrude is a kindred spirit who probably does not require the quarter he gives her to keep her quiet. He scares the little "stray" with a look that expresses "a wilderness of animal feeling."

That same evening, as the thought of driving Anne home after the party runs through his head like a golden thread, as he talks, he already smells the grass where he will park to make love to her, "deep enough into the brushwoods to be concealed." Two paragraphs later his wife tells him that the babysitter has been driven home by someone else. Just as he is about to surge outside the bounds of convention, propelled by animal lust and lured by romantic fancies, he is again stopped by the actions of one of the ever-watchful others in his tight little regulated universe of the work-to-home, city-to-suburb existence.

A former Boy Scout and one who believes in self-discipline, Francis tries to regulate his own bodily needs with exercise, but he only feels more toned up and ready for adventure. His senses, honed by the exercise, make the air seem to smell sharply of change. The "change" he finds, though, is merely the annual event, scheduled by his regulating wife Julia, of having the family photographed for their Christmas card. He is reduced to writing and tearing up love letters to the babysitter, writing— at Julia's desk— while the family waits for him with the photographer downstairs. We are told that "the abyss between his fantasy and the practical world opened so wide that he felt it affected the muscles of his heart." The natural, physical world is both the source of his frustrated animal drive and the scene into which he can project only a fancied fulfillment. Acting like a combination of George F. Babbitt and Miniver Cheevey, Francis Weed fails in his private, fearful attempt to break through the bounds of human artifice and the web of obligations and social rewards that comprise Shady Hill life.

Francis is too timid, too conventional himself, to make the break. He cannot even effectively criticize his environment. It is not Francis Weed who catalogs the frustrations of Shady Hill. It is the only fatherless son in the community who does so, doubting Clayton Thomas, who tells Francis that the people drink too much, have pretentious houses ("all the dovecotes are phony"), clutter up their lives, fear change and "undesirables," and have a future composed of more commuting trains and parties. Of

course, Clayton is callow philosophically and emotionally, but it is Clayton, nonetheless, who makes Francis see the people and objects in his surroundings in their true colors, "like a bitter turn of the weather." It is Clayton who will carry off Anne Murchison and escape the bounds of Shady Hill, and it is Francis Weed who will stay, more dependent on others' opinions and values than ever now that he is under the care of a psychiatrist. Francis is a would-be Hannibal who has never seen the Alps and whose only contact with the woods of satyr and nymph is his own touch on the "holy" wood that he is shaping into another Shady Hill living room adornment, nature refined and confined and unsatisfied.

"The Country Husband" leaves its protagonist in a fragile equipoise that is remarkable for the concatenation of desires, inhibitions, fancies and facts that have inevitably placed him there. It is the imagery of the story, the images of war, myth, music, and nature, that makes us realize just how rooted in our humanity and our American value system Francis Weed's fate really is. This story is Cheever' s art at its most intense and elegant best.

Source: Robert A. Hipkiss, "'The Country Husband'—A Model Cheever Achievement," in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 27, No. 4, Fall 1990, pp. 577-85.

Topics for Further Study

After finishing the story, think about the title. Why do you think Cheever chose it? Is it meant to lend insight into one of the characters or is it intended to support one of the story's themes? Write an essay in which you offer an explanation for the title. Be sure your points are drawn from the text and quote the story where appropriate.

Read another of Cheever's best-loved short stories, "The Swimmer," and compare it to "The Country Husband." If you had to draw conclusions about Cheever's entire body of work (style, construction, characterization, themes, etc.) based only on these two stories, what conclusions would you draw? Make some notes about this. Then read an overview of Cheever's career (Twayne's Authors Series is a good one) to see if your conclusions are in line with published criticism on the work. What does this exercise tell you about how individual works fit into the broader scope of an author's work?

Think about a time when you had a defining or life-changing experience, positive or negative. How did the experience affect you? In retrospect, do you believe that your experience ultimately had a greater or lesser impact than you imagined it would at the time?

Compare and Contrast

1950s: In schools, children are taught how to react in the event of a bomb threat from a foreign nation. Such precautions are considered a necessary part of living in the Atomic Age.

Today: Now that the Cold War is over, most Americans feel little threat of a full-blown nuclear war. In schools, children have fire drills and, in certain parts of the country, tornado drills.

1950s: The suburbs are considered an appropriate environment for rearing children and belonging to a tight-knit community. Because so many people in the suburbs seek a sense of community, various activities, organizations, and social networks emerge.

Today: People move to the suburbs for the same reasons that they moved there in the 1950s. While some of the organizations and gatherings are different, the motivations to participate are the same.

1950s: Most of the country's population growth takes place in the suburbs. This dramatic growth is due to a rise in marriage and birth rates following the war. In addition, federal programs for veterans make housing more affordable. Instead of living in the city, families enjoy spacious homes with front and back yards.

Today: Life in the suburbs is no longer a novelty, but suburbs continue to grow; in fact, the desire to live in the suburbs and population growth continue to push suburbs outward from urban areas into traditionally rural or agricultural areas, a phenomenon called suburban sprawl.

What Do I Read Next?

Cheever's 1978 *The Stories of John Cheever* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. This collection contains the best of Cheever's short fiction spanning his career, providing the new student of his work with a solid starting point.

The Wapshot Chronicle (1957), the 1958 National Book Award winner, is the story of Leander Wapshot, a ferryman who abandons his family and his two sons. The sequel, *The Wapshot Scandal,* was well received.

Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* (1857) is the story of a dissatisfied woman who seeks a more invigorating life for herself. She pursues younger men but remains unfulfilled. Although deemed scandalous at the time of its publication, the work is considered a classic by modern standards.

Further Study

Bosha, Francis J., ed., *Critical Response to John Cheever,* Greenwood Press, 1993.

This review of critical commentary on Cheever's work includes assessments of works ranging from his first to his last. Cheever's individual works are considered and placed in broader literary contexts. This book includes essays written specifically for this volume along with a lengthy interview conducted with Cheever shortly before his death.

Donaldson, Scott, ed., *Conversations with John Cheever,* University Press of Mississippi, 1987.

Donaldson compiled twenty-eight interviews with Cheever, covering topics from subject matter to writing habits. For readers and writers, these interviews reveal how and why Cheever wrote about what he did and how he developed his craft over the course of his career.

Gottlieb, Robert, ed., *Journals of John Cheever,* Alfred A.Knopf, 1991.

Originally gathered by Cheever's son, these entries reflect over thirty-five years of the author's life. The journals (which originally comprised twenty-nine notebooks) are edited here to give insight into the man behind the fiction.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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