

# The Stories of John Cheever Study Guide

## The Stories of John Cheever by John Cheever

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# Contents

<a href="#">The Stories of John Cheever Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 1-8.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 9-18.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 19-25.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 26-30.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 31-39.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 40-52.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 53-61.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns And Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">32</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">34</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">36</a>
<a href="#">Adaptations.....</a>	<a href="#">38</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">39</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">40</a>



# Chapters 1-8

## Chapters 1-8 Summary

The first story in this section is "Goodbye, My Brother." The story revolves around the Pomeroy family. Mrs. Pomeroy is a widow with four children, Diana, Chaddy, Lawrence, and the narrator. The children are all in their mid-to late 30s and have gone their separate ways. Diana lives in France; Chaddy is a successful New York businessman; Lawrence is a lawyer, and the narrator is a teacher in a secondary school.

The story revolves around an annual get-together at the family's seaside mansion in Laud's Head, located on the shore of Massachusetts. Regardless of past conflicts, all of the children are eager to see each other, their spouses and children. Mrs. Pomeroy is particularly happy and will do anything to keep the peace. The family catches up on each other's lives since the last meeting. The narrator talks about each person but particularly Lawrence, whom the other children dislike. Lawrence is especially critical and removed from the rest of the family. It becomes evident that Lawrence wants nothing more to do with the family by his rude actions. At first, Lawrence tells his family not to call him by his childhood nickname "Tifty." To spite him, Diana reverts to another childhood moniker, "Little Jesus." Lawrence also reveals that the only reason he has returned to Laud's Head is to sell his part of the house to Chaddy because he has no desire to have part in a house that is crumbling and built on the cliffs at the seaside where it is sure to sink. All bets are off and the children argue despite their mother's objections. Lawrence tells the family that he plans to never see them again.

Irene and Jim Westcott are the main characters in the humorous story titled "The Enormous Radio." Irene and Jim have a peaceful existence and share the love of classical music. One of the Westcott's favorite activities is to sit by the radio and listen to various classical works by composers like Schubert and Mozart. One day the radio stops working and Irene is upset. Jim promises to buy a new radio.

The next day, Jim comes home with an expensive, new radio that is quite large. Irene hates it immediately on sight because of its ugliness. However it turns out that the radio has an excellent tone. After a short time of listening to the radio, Irene discovers that there's a great deal of interference and static. Jim takes the radio to be repaired.

When the radio is returned to the Westcott apartment, Irene notices something peculiar. On certain stations the radio picks up signals from the other apartments, allowing Irene to eavesdrop. At first Irene is horrified because of the invasion of privacy. Eventually, Irene becomes completely obsessed with the goings-on of her neighbors. The obsession begins to take a toll on Irene's mental and physical health. For the first time in the story Jim and Irene have a huge argument, and Jim sets Irene straight on her newly-developed prudishness.



"O City of Broken Dreams" is the story of Evarts and Alice Malloy. The Malloys are traveling to New York City from their home in Wentworth, Indiana accompanied by their five-year-old daughter, Mildred-Rose. Evarts has written a play about the people in his hometown and has received interest from a notable producer in Manhattan. The Malloys have packed up everything to go to New York City to follow Evart's dream. The couple is so excited that they tell virtually everyone they see about the potential success of the play. Evarts knows that he is out of his comfort zone and into a completely foreign world.

The Malloys have taken in all of the sights of New York City and are fascinated by each and every one, from the skyscrapers to the selection of foods at the automat. The man interested in producing the play is kind to the Malloys. However, an agent convinces Evarts to turn his back on the producer, so that he might get a better deal elsewhere. Foolishly, Evarts takes the advice of the agent and in the process completely alienates the producer. Throughout the entire story Evarts wishes he had the usual comfort of the advice of Mama Finelli, a wise woman from Wentworth.

One day as Evarts is walking down the streets in Manhattan, he runs into Mama Finelli. Evarts is shocked to see the woman in the city. Mama tells Evarts that she has been contacted about the play and is going to sue him for libel. Evarts and Alice take Mildred-Rose and leave New York City with the intention of going to Hollywood, where no one knows Mama or anyone else from Wentworth.

"The Sutton Place Story" is the tale of a three-year-old girl named Deborah Tennyson. Deborah is the daughter of wealthy and prestigious parents who view their daughter as more of an accessory than a child. Deborah's nanny, Mrs. Harley, spends a great deal of time with the child. Although Mrs. Harley is past retirement age, the Tennysons believe that she chooses to be their nanny because of her love of children. This, however, is untrue. Mrs. Harley finds children to be irritating yet refuses to confess that she needs the money.

During one of the Tennysons' dinner parties, they meet a woman named Renee. Renee and Deborah hit it off immediately and become good friends. Eventually, Renee begins to secretly babysit Deborah while Mrs. Harley goes to church on Sunday mornings. Neither woman sees harm in the arrangement and Deborah is very happy.

One day, Deborah wants to prove that she has friends just like Renee and leaves Renee's apartment unseen. Everyone is frantic. The Tennysons discover Deborah was at Renee's apartment and are furious and distraught. When Deborah is found unharmed, Mr. Tennyson expresses little relief but grills Deborah about the imaginary friend.

## Chapters 1-8 Analysis

It is clear that Lawrence Pomeroy has come to a point in his life where he feels his career and social standing have allowed him to rise above the rest of the family.



Although Mrs. Pomeroy and the other children are confused and upset by this behavior, none of them is actually surprised. In some way, there is a sense of relief considering the fact that Lawrence was always disagreeable and none of the other children actually liked him very much. There was a sense of hope that age and maturity would change Lawrence's sense of loyalty and diminish the character's proclivity to criticize. Disappointment is mixed with relief as the story ends.

"The Enormous Radio" is an interesting look into the lives of Irene and Jim Westcott. Before the purchase of the radio, Irene is a happy and carefree woman, content to live in her small world with her husband and child. When the first radio breaks, Irene's world is upset and Jim rushes to fix it. When the radio starts picking up signals from other apartments, Irene begins to indulge in what she considers to be a guilty pleasure. The neighbors' conversations reveal that their lives are much different on the inside than they would appear to their neighbors. Irene becomes shocked at the behavior of some of the neighbors and goes as far as to try and interfere in their business. Jim doesn't realize the severity of Irene's obsession until he comes home one day to find his wife hysterical over an event that is taking place in a neighbor's apartment. Irene suddenly has developed an extreme sense of indignation and hordes her privacy more than ever. As Irene tells Jim of the transgressions of the neighbors, Jim explodes in anger and reminds Irene that she is not a saint.

Evarts' introduction into the intoxicating world of theatre and Manhattan overtake his well-honed sense of loyalty and intelligence. The fact that Evarts becomes greedy and turns his back on the play's potential producer shows a definite lack of sophistication and morals while showcasing the man's emerging greed. The incident with Mama Finelli shows that no one is immune to the concept of fast money and a showy lifestyle. Although one would expect the Malloys to run home to Indiana and hide, they choose to continue their attempts in California, where they most likely will make the same mistakes.

The Tennysons obviously see Deborah as an accessory to be taken out and shown off to their friends and colleagues. Deborah seems oblivious to this, yet tries hard to please her mother. Mrs. Harley sees Renee's offer to baby sit as a much needed respite from caring for the child, and although she knows it is inappropriate, the offer is too good to refuse.

The arrangement with Renee is completely above board and sweet. Deborah's leaving the apartment is innocent, and the little girl just wants to have friends and be grown up. Although the Tennysons are full of anxiety upon their daughter's disappearance, their shallowness reappears when Deborah is found.



# Chapters 9-18

## Chapters 9-18 Summary

Ralph and Laura Whittemore are eager to make a fortune. The Whittemores always have several irons in the fire, yet could not be considered treasure hunters. Ralph and Laura are both from the Midwest and met in Manhattan. The couple married three months after meeting and soon discovered that their collective salaries were hardly enough to make ends meet. Ralph tries desperately to improve his standing through a series of job changes and promotions. After one new job seems to be the answer to the couple's prayers, they plan to get a larger apartment, buy a second car, and have a child. Neither Ralph nor Laura is especially giddy about the potential rise in salary and standing because it is something they have always expected.

Laura becomes pregnant and quits her job. After a while, Ralph decides to call his potential employers. After getting the runaround for quite some time, one of the employers tells Ralph that he has been passed over for the job. Ralph is devastated. Laura does not seem to be worried as they have a small amount of money in the bank. After their daughter is born, Laura continues to stay home while Ralph works.

Despite all of Ralph's attempts, from looking for better jobs to inventing innovative products, the couple remains poor.

"Clancy in the Tower of Babel" is the story of James and Nora Clancy, immigrants from Ireland. Clancy takes a job at an upscale New York apartment complex as an elevator operator. For long time, Clancy is the ideal employee due to his strict moral code, cleanliness, and good manners. It takes a while for Clancy to learn the names and apartment numbers of the residents, but once those facts are learned everything is smooth sailing at work. Everyday Clancy goes home from work and tells Nora about the apartment building and all its residents. One day, Mr. Rowantree, a single man, returns home from a trip to Europe. Clancy is immediately fascinated by Rowantree and immediately notices that the man never has guests or visitors like the other tenants. Eventually, Clancy begins to speak to the man and encourages him to have dinner with a friend. Clancy is convinced that Rowantree must be lonely.

One day, Mr. Rowantree comes home with a friend named Bobby. For the first time Clancy understands that Rowantree is gay. Clancy is outraged and refused to take the couple in the elevator. Rowantree tries to get Clancy fired. Clancy becomes ill and spends some time in the hospital. One of the other employees at the apartment building brings Clancy a collection taken up by the tenants. Clancy finds out that Rowantree is the person that arranged the collection and is baffled. Although Clancy and Rowantree continue to have terrible disagreements and Rowantree still attempts to get Clancy fired, Clancy realizes that he has to learn to mind his own business.



"The Chaste Clarissa" is the story of Clarissa Ryan and her interactions with a man named Baxter. Baxter is a bachelor with a notorious reputation for being impulsive and promiscuous. Clarissa is a quiet beauty, daughter-in-law of Mrs. Ryan, an old woman that lives near Baxter's summer home. Baxter is immediately taken with Clarissa, who is so reserved that she appears frigid. Baxter learns that Clarissa will be spending the summer alone at the family's cottage at Holly Cove. Baxter is determined to get to know Clarissa although he knows the importance of being careful.

Baxter is invited to Mrs. Ryan's bon voyage party as she is setting off for Europe. Baxter uses this introduction to visit the cottage after Mrs. Ryan is gone. Clarissa refuses Baxter's invitation to go swimming at first but finally relents. Baxter becomes completely obsessed with Clarissa and makes excuses to visit her at the cottage. Clarissa is basically oblivious to Baxter until Baxter kisses her, at which time Clarissa begins to avoid Baxter.

Baxter knows that the kiss was inappropriate and happened too soon. Baxter is determined to make up for his actions and continues to go to the cottage. There are times when Clarissa will not see him and eventually Baxter tells the housekeeper that he has come to say goodbye. Clarissa invites Baxter in and the two spend the afternoon talking with Baxter complementing Clarissa.

## Chapters 9-18 Analysis

Much of Ralph and Laura's married life revolves around trying to make more money. Laura isn't very worried considering she has a small amount of money in savings from her parents. Being from the Midwest, Ralph believes that it is his job to take care of the family and to provide for Laura. Laura never looks down on Ralph for not making the kind of money they both dreamed of, yet Ralph is hard on himself and never stops trying to find something better. Years go by and all of Ralph's valiant efforts fail. Just when a new job or prospect seems like the answer to all of Ralph's prayers something happens and it falls through. In the end, Ralph finally realizes that he has been chasing a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow while it has been in his house the entire time in the form of Laura.

Jim Clancy is a strict Irish Catholic with very strong opinions on right and wrong. Before Clancy found the job at the apartment complex, he went to church every day and prayed for an intercession. No matter what Clancy does in his life, his strict faith is present and rules every situation. Although Clancy is nothing more than an elevator operator to upscale clients, he tends to become personally involved and finds it easy to make moral judgments on the residents. Rowantree keeps mainly to himself until Clancy pushes for information. Still, the man remains rather private. The conflict between Clancy and Rowantree comes about when Bobby moves into the building. Clancy's sense of moral code is violated, and the man becomes completely outraged that someone could behave in such a sinful and unacceptable manner. Rowantree is an enigma in many ways. Clancy does not understand the man and his dramatic actions from attempting to kill himself to raising money when Clancy becomes ill. It is apparent

that the two men will never get along, but Clancy learns that if he wants to keep his job it is better to remain silent.

It is clear that Baxter's attraction to Clarissa is a surprise to everyone. Baxter knows his reputation may create a problem as he attempts to get to know Clarissa. There is no explanation as to why Baxter is so smitten or is willing to try so hard to get the woman's attention. Clarissa is treated so poorly by her in-laws that the woman dares not speak her own opinions and is always told that her opinions do not matter, that she is stupid. Baxter is horrified to learn this and attempts to get Clarissa to come out of her shell. Clarissa is so used to being controlled that expressing herself comes as both a relief and a shock. After refusing Baxter's advances a number of times, Clarissa finally lets him into the cottage, because she thinks he is going away. Although it is clear that Clarissa will remain chaste, some part of her allows Baxter to get to know her on an intimate level.





# Chapters 19-25

## Chapters 19-25 Summary

In the story, "The Sorrows of Gin," Amy Lawton is a fourth-grade girl, who is an only child. Mr. and Mrs. Lawton are social butterflies, who have much time for work, drinking and socializing but very little time for Amy. It is often left in the care of the housekeeper. Rosemary, a relatively new housekeeper, is a lonely religious woman, who speaks to Amy of loneliness and alcoholism. Rosemary convinces Amy to pour her father's gin down the kitchen sink so the Lawtons won't drink so much. Amy is convinced her father will not miss the gin and takes Rosemary's advice.

Rosemary goes away on a trip. When the housekeeper returns, she is disheveled and reeks of stale alcohol and is fired. The Lawtons have terrible luck with housekeepers and can't seem to keep one for any period of time. After Amy dumps the bottle of gin down the kitchen sink, Mr. Lawton fires the newest housekeeper, an honorable woman who doesn't so much as swear. The housekeeper and Mr. Lawton get into an argument and a screaming match ensues. The woman calls the police saying Mr. Lawton is drunk and abusive.

Behavior in the Lawton household does not improve and eventually Amy tries to run away. It takes Amy's disappearance to make Mr. Lawton understand that he has been giving Amy the wrong impression about what is truly important.

"O Youth and Beauty!" is the story of Cash Bentley. Cash is a former track star who never gets tired of discussing the glory days and reenacting races and hurdle jumps. The Bentleys have many struggles with money, and Cash seems to have repeated disappointments in business which does not allow the family to get ahead financially. Cash's wife, Louise, runs from morning till night, taking care of the home and the children. Louise is often frustrated by the family's financial troubles.

All the people in the neighborhood believe that Cash and Louise are happily married, even though Cash tends to have a bad temper. When Cash is injured in the reenactment of a race and is forced to spend time at home recuperating from a broken leg, the couple's relationship disintegrates. After the broken leg heals, Cash returns to his favorite hobby of rearranging the furniture wherever he may be, to relive his years as a track star. One night Cash insists that Louise fire the starter pistol even though she has never done so before and is afraid. The first time Louise fires the pistol nothing happens because the safety is still engaged. Cash is annoyed and tells Louise what to do. Too impatient to wait for Louise to fire the starter pistol, Cash proceeds to use the sofa as a hurdle, and leaps over at the same time Louise fires the pistol. Cash is shot and dies immediately.

"The Five Forty-Eight" concerns the relationship of a man named Blake and his secretary. The secretary is new to the company and although she is shy and awkward,



Blake decides to give her a chance. The woman tells Blake that she had been in the hospital for eight months and had some difficulty finding a job. The woman turns out to be punctual and efficient. One night, Blake and the secretary work late, and after having a drink at her apartment, they sleep together. As Blake prepares to leave, he notices that the secretary is crying, but does nothing about it. The next day Blake realizes that he has made a mistake and asks personnel to fire her. The secretary comes to see him after several days, and Blake refuses to see her.

On Blake's way home from work one evening he sees the former secretary waiting for him. Blake avoids the woman and begins to worry, as it is obvious that the former secretary is following him through the city and may mean to do harm. Blake manages to escape by walking into a men's club to have a drink. While hiding out Blake realizes that he has missed the express train and will have to catch the next one in order to go home. On the train, the secretary finds Blake and sits with him. The woman begins to cry and Blake gets up to leave. The secretary tells Blake that she has a gun and the only thing she wants is for him to read a letter she has written. The secretary tells Blake that she has been very ill and is unable to get a job because Blake poisoned the minds of other potential employers. The secretary says that the only thing she has ever wanted is a little love. Blake is forced to get off the train and walk away with the secretary at his back. The secretary forces Blake to get down on the ground, saying that she will not hurt him as long as he obeys. After Blake is lying face down in the dirt and coal the woman realizes that her life can go on now that she has found some sense of kindness and mercy. The secretary walks away.

"The Worm in the Apple" is a very humorous tale about a third person's view of the Crutchman family. Mr. and Mrs. Crutchman are a happily married couple with two children. The Crutchmans live in a large house in a nice suburb called Shady Hill. By all intents and purposes, the Crutchman family seems to be idyllic, happy with life and each other. The narrator examines every part of the Crutchmans' lives and for every positive aspect finds some plausible opposite, which creates a great deal of humor.

For example, the Crutchmans' large house has many large glass windows to let in light. While some may admire this feature, the narrator believes that the family must have some incredible guilt to need that much light. Mrs. Crutchman is an avid gardener with alabaster skin. The narrator thinks the woman is obsessed with the earth and that her pallor is a telltale sign of nymphomania. Mr. Crutchman likes to garden without a shirt. To which the narrator assumes that the man has a "tendency to infantile exhibitionism."

The oldest child, Rachel, was an industrious, chubby child that grew into a beautiful woman. The narrator imagines that Mrs. Crutchman spent all her time insulting Rachel, her ugliness, and the size of her immense feet. In order to oppress Rachel, Mrs. Crutchman would surely dress her in ill fitting, ugly clothing and not allow her to leave the house. Because of this, Rachel was sure to fall in love with an unsuitable, unstable artist and flee to Italy. When Rachel grew into a beautiful woman, the narrator assumes the girl would take up drinking, smoking and fornication without a conscience.



Tom fell in love with a rich girl, which naturally led the narrator to believe that he was a gold digger, and the fact that he failed one year in high school obviously made the boy inferior and doomed to a life of failure. Eventually, Tom joined the Army and was stationed overseas and living a very successful life.

After the children left home, it was obvious to the narrator that the Crutchmans' marriage would fall apart. Long gone would be the days of artistic hobbies and service to the community. At last, the family's dark secrets would emerge. The narrator seems disappointed when the Crutchmans continue to live a happy and fulfilling life together.

## Chapters 19-25 Analysis

Mr. and Mrs. Lawton are self-involved to the point that they ignore Amy and treat the staff as unimportant people that don't deserve to be acknowledged or appreciated. Amy is eager to please, but never seems to be able to do anything to her parents' satisfaction. The little girl takes the advice of Rosemary, who seems to be a loving, caring woman, who will devote time to the child. Although Rosemary seems to be a devout Christian with negative opinions on alcohol, it is clear that the woman, much like her sister, is not a teetotaler. The Lawton's are horrified that Rosemary would return drunk and immediately fire her, adding Rosemary to the long list of incompetent servants.

The ongoing parties and absence of the Lawtons causes Amy to seek attention and affection elsewhere. Finally, Amy decides that traveling would be exciting and provide her with a better lifestyle. Amy takes money from her mother and goes to the train station. The train master calls Mr. Lawton, who finally realizes error of his ways.

Cash Bentley is a self-involved man who has little appreciation or tolerance for his wife, Louise. Louise works hard to keep the house in good order and yet her complaints about the lack of money anger Cash. Cash is always the life of the party and is eager to relive his glory days when he was a track star. Cash is always eager to show off, and it is obvious that the glory days were the last time the man felt successful. Friends and family encourage Cash to hurdle over a living room furniture and race, even after he is seriously injured when a chest falls on his leg and breaks it. Cash's impatience and domineering behavior get the better of him when he insists that Louise fire a starter pistol. Although Louise is afraid, it is her place to do what her husband tells her to do and carries out his orders. Killing Cash is an accident, yet it frees Louise from his tyranny.

Blake makes an error in judgment when he decides to sleep with the secretary. The woman is so insignificant to Blake that for a long time he cannot even remember her name. The woman is disposable. Blake's answer to this situation is to avoid it, and he takes time off from work. When the secretary shows up at the office, Blake has subordinates turn the woman away. Because of this, the secretary feels that she has no other option than to follow Blake when he leaves the office at the end of the day. Blake sees the secretary and notices that she is disheveled. Blake is embarrassed and wants



nothing more than to avoid the woman. No matter how hard Blake tries, it is impossible to escape the consequences of his indiscretion. The woman is obviously mentally unstable, and Blake must pay for his ill-treatment of her. After the secretary humiliates Blake, she realizes that she has some value as a person and is able to put the situation in the past.

The story of the Crutchman family is narrated by someone who is obviously the neighborhood gossip and one who is completely miserable in her own existence to the point where anyone who is happy must come under a great deal of scrutiny. The narrator is able to take virtually any situation and turn it into something negative and horrible. Some of the observations are so far-fetched and ludicrous that it is difficult to believe the narrator could actually invent, much less believe, them. At the end of the story the narrator seems to grudgingly give in to the fact that the Crutchmans are still a happy couple, although one can tell that the narrator is simply waiting for the other shoe to drop.



# Chapters 26-30

## Chapters 26-30 Summary

"The Trouble of Marcie Flint" revolves around the story of Charlie Flint, Marcie's husband. The story starts with Charlie being aboard the SS Augustus on his way to Italy. Charlie has run away from Marcie and their children after having been married for 15 years. The friends and neighbors believed Charlie went away on business, which was often the case. After many weeks, Charlie did not return, and Marcie had to take control of the situation. Charlie seems to have been very happy with a comfortable life he had established over the years. One day when Charlie comes home, Marcie tells him that she wants a divorce and that she is tired of living that way. Charlie runs away, but after a while of being on the sea he decides that he needs to go home and comfort Marcie. Meanwhile, Marcie goes on with her life, becoming deeply involved in community projects and resisting the temptation to have an affair.

"The Duchess" is the story of Donna Carla Malvolio-Pommodori. Donna Carla is the daughter of an Italian Duke and Duchess. The narrator talks about Donna's family history from the time she was born in Tuscany until they went into exile. The Duke was a wealthy, titled man with a bright future. One day, the Duke suffers a horrible fall off a horse and spends several years in recovery due to a fractured skull, broken legs, and smashed vertebrae. Eventually, the Duke falls in love with his nurse, who is considered to be a commoner. The Duke's family vehemently objected to the relationship and when the couple decides to marry, they are forbidden to enter Rome. It isn't until the Duke's parents die many years later that the family returns to Rome. Donna Carla enjoys living in Rome in the manner of a royal family. It isn't long before the family is thrown into an uproar due to the country being invaded. Because of the Duke's title, there is a hit put on him with a price of one million lire on his head. The family escapes and goes to live in the village under assumed names. Donna Carla likes being a commoner, but the behavior is severely frowned upon by her parents, particularly by the Duchess. Donna Carla is never to forget she is royalty. When it comes time for Donna Carla to start dating, her mother is extremely strict about the quality of suitors that would be permitted into their home. Before every date, the mother interviews potential suitors. As a result, many are scared away.

After Donna Carla's father dies, she takes over the family accounts. Donna Carla spends a great deal of time with Cecil Smith, the man in charge of the family estate. Gossip surrounds Donna Carla, as it is considered improper for a noblewoman to spend so much time in the office of a single man, despite the purpose.

A prince approaches Donna Carla and wants to marry her as it would be politically advantageous. Donna Carla is not willing to marry the prince. Many years pass, and Donna Carla requests an audience with the Pope at which time she asks for permission to marry Cecil Smith.



## Chapters 26-30 Analysis

The tale of Charlie Flint really has very little to do with Marcie other than to acknowledge the fact that she was having a difficult time keeping the family together while dealing with day-to-day issues, which are important to her. Charlie is selfish and can only think of getting away and exploring Italy, perhaps finding a new and more exciting life. Once Marcie asks for a divorce, Charlie realizes what he would be giving up and plans to return.

Donna Carla enjoys being a noblewoman yet does not maintain the same attitude as her mother. Donna Carla never sees a line drawn between her own worth and that of commoners. Over the years Donna Carla tries to live up to the title and does well at managing the estate left by the Duke. Despite all the rumors that surround Donna Carla, the woman goes on about her business oblivious to the fact that she is creating enemies and jealousies among the people around her.

The refusal to marry the prince is seen as being a foolish move by many. Donna Carla is determined to be happy and follow her own dreams. After many years, Donna Carla gives up on pursuing a noble existence and wishes to marry Cecil, who is dependable and loyal. After Donna Carla and Cecil marry, the opinions of everyone around the woman change for the better.



# Chapters 31-39

## Chapters 31-39 Summary

"The Scarlet Moving Van" brings to town Peaches and Gee-Gee, a couple who moves from town to town. On the first night in the new house, Peaches and Gee-Gee are invited to the Folkestones' house next door. The evening goes along rather well until Gee-Gee gets drunk. At that time, Gee-Gee becomes extremely rude and obnoxious and he and Peaches are thrown out of the house. Peaches apologizes profusely and tells Mrs. Folkestone that because of Gee-Gee's behavior they have to move about once a year and it is inevitable that everyone in the neighborhood will become sick of them and become anxious to see them go.

The next time Mr. Folkestone sees Gee-Gee, everything is back to normal. The neighborhood decides to give Gee-Gee another chance and the couple is invited to a dinner party. Gee-Gee gets drunk, stands up on the table and says that he has "to teach them," although the man never elaborates. This behavior continues. And while Gee-Gee acts normal when sober, he is never apologetic for his behavior when he's been drinking. Eventually, the scarlet moving van returns and Gee-Gee and Peaches move away. Mr. Folkestone visits Gee-Gee who has broken his leg. Mr. Folkestone wants to help, but ends up leaving and having to drive home in a horrible storm. Suddenly Mr. Folkestone begins to drink more than usual. Mrs. Folkestone comments on it and suddenly it seems as if Mr. Folkestone has adopted Gee-Gee's behavior.

The Seton family travels to Florence so Mr. Seton can work on an Italian version of a sitcom he has written. The entire time the family is in Florence, people speculate about them and their unusual ways. The neighbors think Mr. Seton is a poet and are fascinated. Mr. Seton is not a poet, but was afraid to tell the people that he is a mere television writer. The life of the poet seems so much more respectable and mysterious. The family enjoys themselves while staying in Italy and has no idea how long they will be there. The family basically keeps to themselves. Toward the end of the story, the first run of the Italian sitcom is ready to be viewed by Mr. Seton and the editors. The news of the sitcom becomes public knowledge, and suddenly Mr. Seton is worried he will be shunned and that the locals will be offended by his liberal American views and humor. After the showing, several people approach Mr. Seton on the street and tell him how much they love the sitcom.

"The Lowboy" is a story about an inheritance. There are two brothers, Richard and the narrator. The narrator refers to Richard as being "small" in both stature and demeanor. According to the narrator Richard is nothing more than a spoiled child. When the boys were young, their mother died. Because the mother's will was vague, many of the family heirlooms were claimed by their cousin Matilda. Matilda is now an old woman and has contacted the boys to ask if they want any of the family heirlooms. The family has always had a deep sentimental attachment to furniture. While the narrator really doesn't care all that much, Richard is incensed when he learns that his brother will be receiving





the ornate lowboy that resided for many years in the family's dining room. When Richard asks why he wasn't the one to get the lowboy, the narrator tells him that it's really not that big a deal and if Richard wants it, he can have it. Richard is ecstatic and becomes completely obsessed. When the time comes for Richard to get the lowboy, it turns out that his brother will have to get it and store it in the garage until Richard can make the trip to pick it up. Finally the day comes when Richard picks up the lowboy. On the way home there is an accident, and the lowboy is damaged. Richard is beside himself with anger. The lowboy is over 200 years old and although it can be repaired the value of the piece has diminished. As it was, someone already offered Richard \$10,000 for the piece. Richard is so attached to the furniture that he decides to keep it.

Richard's obsession gets worse and soon the lowboy appears exactly as it had in their childhood home, from the carpet to the chrysanthemums in a silver vase. Before long, the spirits of ancestors begin to visit Richard and the man becomes completely haunted. The narrator sees what is happening and goes home and smashes every heirloom he received from Cousin Matilda.

## Chapters 31-39 Analysis

The Folkestones like Peaches and Gee-Gee the first time they meet. After Gee-Gee gets drunk, he begins to insult the couple saying they are stuffy and don't understand, although the man will never elaborate.

The neighborhood where the families live is a friendly community, and everyone wants to get along. Because of this Gee-Gee gets more opportunities than he should be afforded. Just as Peaches predicted, everyone is glad to see them move away. It is unclear why Mr. Folkestone makes the trip to see Gee-Gee after the way the man has behaved. The entire time Mr. Folkestone is visiting, Gee-Gee's behavior becomes increasingly intolerable. It is unclear why Mr. Folkestone would adopt Gee-Gee's behavior considering that everyone found it so distasteful. It may be a sense of self sabotage or perhaps Mr. Folkestone likes the fact that Gee-Gee has no visible responsibilities.

Mr. Seton is guilty of assumption when it comes to the Italian audience. Seton has definite ideas about how the American sitcom should be translated yet is worried that it may be somewhat offensive to the Italians, who are more traditional. The Italians also make assumptions about Seton and his family. In the end, all are surprised to learn the truth and that the assumptions they made were incorrect.

Richard's motives for wanting the lowboy are questionable. It seems that while Richard did like the lowboy, the fact that his brother is going to receive it causes Richard to become obsessed. The narrator has a full life and doesn't understand Richard's smallness or pettiness. When Richard makes the narrator promise that he won't try to keep the lowboy while it's in storage, the narrator knows that his brother is going off the deep end. Richard is transported into another world after the lowboy takes up residence in the house. Every relative and childhood memory returns, and suddenly Richard



realizes that the childhood wasn't nearly as happy as he remembered. Richard becomes trapped in bad memories and melancholy.



# Chapters 40-52

## Chapters 40-52 Summary

"A Miscellany of Characters That Will Not Appear" is a list of short descriptions of people or things that will not or have not appeared in the Cheever stories. The list is rather humorous and includes Marlon Brando, lushes, "scornful descriptions of American landscapes," explicit sex, or the detailed lives of homosexuals.

"The Chimera" is the story of a man living a typical suburban life. The man becomes bored and begins to blame his wife for ruining his life. The couple insults each other and both claim they never had the opportunity to do things they've always wanted to do. The wife wanted to be a congresswoman; the man dreamed of climbing the Matterhorn.

The man decides to have an affair. The man's conscience gets the better of him and he casts the idea aside. That night, the man invents his own imaginary mistress. The woman's name is Olga. The man falls in love with Olga, who has a richly-detailed life history. The man spends a great deal of time with Olga, and the wife begins to question why her husband is talking to himself. Olga leaves suddenly and the man is devastated. Eventually Olga returns and tells the man of a terrible story about a live-in lover and being sent to jail. Olga decides to move back to California and leaves the man devastated.

"The Angel of the Bridge" is the story of a man who is embarrassed by his elderly mother's vibrancy and desire to live life to the fullest. The man claims that as his mother ages she becomes increasingly obsessed with yesteryear. Although the mother is spry and lively, she has an intense fear of airplanes. The son thinks the fear is irrational and ridiculous, particularly since he enjoys flying and does so often. The son approaches the family doctor to talk about the mother's phobia. The mother is afraid of airplanes, and the narrator's brother is terrified of elevators. The doctor tells the narrator that he needs to leave his mother alone and focus on himself.

One day, the narrator discovers he is terrified of bridges to the point of paralysis. The condition becomes severe to the point that there are only a couple of bridges in which the driver can cross without having a serious panic attack. One day a woman appears on the bridge just as the man is having serious anxiety. The woman is hitchhiking, and because she talks and sings to the narrator he is able to cross the bridge without further incident.

"Reunion" is the story of a young man who is traveling through New York City and makes arrangements to have lunch with his father, who he has not seen since his parents' divorce three years previous. The young man wants to be like his father, successful and savvy. The father and son meet at Grand Central Station, but there is only an hour and a half before the son has to catch a train to a rental cottage on the Cape.



The boy is excited to see his father and wishes the pair of them could be photographed together. Because of time limits there is not time to go to the father's club uptown, so the men choose a restaurant close to Grand Central. Once inside the restaurant, the father is extremely rude and treats the waiter so poorly that the father and son are thrown out of the restaurant. Father and son move on to a new restaurant where the father's behavior is equally bad if not worse. The waiter questions the age of the son not sure if the boy is of legal age to be drinking alcohol. Once again, the father and son are thrown out of the restaurant. The fourth place the father chooses is an Italian restaurant. The father insists on speaking Italian to the waiter even though the waiter claims not to speak Italian. The captain of the waiters tells the father and son that the table is reserved. The father asks for another table, and the captain says that all the tables are reserved. The father and son must leave the restaurant. The father insists on going to yet another establishment, but it is time for the son to catch the train. On the way the father insists on buying a newspaper so the son will have something to read on the train. As usual, the man approaches the newsstand and is extremely rude and insulting. The father desires nothing more than to irritate the news man, at which point the son leaves to catch the train. The son never sees his father again.

"Montraldo" begins with the story of a man who robs Tiffany's by replacing an expensive diamond for a fake. The man sells the diamond on the street and pays for a ticket aboard a ship sailing for Italy. On the ship, the man has an affair with a married woman. The couple parts when the ship arrives in Genoa. The man travels on to Montraldo, a seaside village. The man is determined to live the life of a real Italian and decides to rent a room in a villa atop a cliff. When the man rings the doorbell, he is greeted by a rude servant named Assunta. The mistress of the house is an elderly woman who resides as a hermit in Montraldo. Rumor in the village is that the woman was once royalty but was forced into exile after an unsuitable love affair. The woman had lived in Montraldo for fifty years. The only person the old woman has contact with is Assunta. The old woman is kind to Assunta but for every kindness, Assunta responds with screams, threats, and insults. The man is completely baffled at why the signora would take such abuse from a servant.

The man is entranced by Montraldo and spends a great deal of time on the beaches and in cafés. Montraldo is not a wealthy seaside village and although it represents everything the man detests about a struggling municipality he enjoys the scenery and the quaint old world feel.

One day the man returns to the villa to find that the signora has fallen ill. The man is sent to the village to get a priest. As the woman lies dying she finally reveals why she tolerated Assunta and her abusive behavior. Assunta is the woman's illegitimate daughter.

## Chapters 40-52 Analysis

The story of Olga makes one realize the depth of the imagination and the mind. It is obvious that the man created what he was missing in his life. Because Olga wasn't real,

the man was able to soothe his conscience about being unfaithful to his wife. The man exhibits an extreme sense of self denial by creating Olga's story and how he must let her go.

It is not uncommon for a child to be embarrassed by the behavior of a parent. The family doctor was very wise when he instructed the narrator to leave his mother alone. It was clear to the doctor that the man was avoiding his own issues. Once the man began to think about his own life, the fear of bridges developed. All the things the man was afraid of regarding his mother and brother were present in him and the knowledge of that fact took a toll on his psyche.

The father in the "Reunion" exhibits a combination of insecurity and arrogance when it comes to service people. This may be due in part to his position as a successful businessman, plus the desire to impress his young son. The only thing the man succeeds in doing is alienating everyone around him, including the boy.

The signora in Montraldo is a sad and lonely woman, who wants nothing more than to hold on to the only thing she has left in the world, her daughter. There is no real telltale sign as to why Assunta is so rude and horrible to the signora except perhaps that she can get away with it. When the Signora tells Assunta the truth about being her mother, the girl reacts horribly, screaming at the Signora not wanting it to be true. The Signora dies and Assunta is left alone in the villa.



# Chapters 53-61

## Chapters 53-61 Summary

"The Geometry of Love" is the story of Charlie Mallory and his wife, Mathilda. Charlie is a freelance engineer who works in Manhattan. One day Charlie is walking downtown and notices all the women are well dressed and wear a look of haunting guilt. Charlie decides that the women are out buying presents for their children to make up for the fact that they are having affairs. Charlie is thinking about his impressions walking through Woolworth's toy department. Charlie spots a woman wearing a fur coat, much like the one he had given Mathilda for Christmas. The woman turns out to be Mathilda. Charlie approaches Mathilda and speaks to her. Before Charlie can say more than a word, Mathilda creates a scene telling Charlie she does not appreciate being spied on, that the behavior is despicable. Charlie tries to explain that he was in Woolworth's buying a screwdriver, which is true. Mathilda won't hear it. Charlie suggests that they go and have a drink but Mathilda says she will not drink nor travel with a spy. Charlie goes back to work.

Mathilda has always been volatile and arguments with her are not uncommon yet this last scene in Woolworth's is uncharacteristic even for Mathilda. Charlie tries to decide what to do about his wife's behavior. Back at the office Charlie is alone and spends time trying to figure out what to do. Charlie looks out the window and sees a truck with an advertisement for Euclid Dry-cleaning and Dyeing. Euclid's name reminds Charlie of the theory of the right triangle and how there is a doctrine for understanding proportion using the theorem of equal angles. Charlie decides to use the slide rule to determine the angles of his relationship with Mathilda. One side of the triangle is Mathilda; the base of triangle is comprised of their two children; Charlie is the third side. Charlie tries to define the characteristics of each side to determine how to make the relationship proportional.

Charlie discovers that Mathilda is not having an affair; rather, she dresses up to take herself to lunch and to a movie. Charlie feels better about the phantom lover and soon begins to use geometry for every aspect of his life. The children noticed the change in their father, that Charlie has become much happier.

Charlie has to go to Chicago on business. Charlie finds more uses for geometry, although the man is sure that the slide rule won't be needed on this trip. Charlie is invited to dinner with one of the Chicago associates. Charlie could not refuse and when he shows up at the house of the associate, the man's wife is crying and tagging all the furniture. The wife tells Charlie she is leaving her husband. The husband tells Charlie that this happens once or twice a year, and that the wife gets over it. The experience in Chicago is quite strange, from the hysterical wife to the upstairs neighbor, whose husband put their kitten in a blender. Charlie is eager to return home.

Charlie and Mathilda take a trip to Italy, where for ten days the couple is happy. On the last day Mathilda returns to her melancholy and argumentative self. About a week after



the Malory's return from Capri, Charlie falls ill, and is rushed to the hospital. Charlie's condition is serious and he is listed in critical condition. Mathilda visits, and soon is complaining that Charlie is so lucky to have people wait on him hand and foot. Charlie asks the nurse for his slide rule and notebook. What Charlie has discovered is that there is no way to create a lasting and definite proportion in his relationship with Mathilda. Shortly after Charlie dies.

Neddy Merrill is enjoying a perfect afternoon by the pool at a neighbor's house. The Merrills and their friends joke about having hangovers from the night before as they enjoy the sunny day. Neddy is convinced that the only thing better than this day is to go for a swim. Neddy is not a young man, approaching middle-age yet is still adventurous. Neddy is the sort that jumps into the pool without testing the water, thinking that people who ease themselves into the water are detestable. Suddenly Neddy decides to swim across the county. In his mind there are a series of maps outlining every swimming pool from the friend's house to home. Neddy sets off full of vigor. Along the way Neddy stops and visits many neighbors, some of whom offer him a drink or food. Some insist that the Merrills should come for dinner soon, and Neddy makes plans to get in touch with several different couples. About halfway the trip, Neddy realizes he gets more tired the closer to home he gets and the more people begin to change their attitudes and are not quite as happy to see him. One of the last stops is at a woman's house. The woman had been Neddy's mistress for a short time. The woman is rude and immediately tells Neddy that she will not give him any money. Neddy is confused, and when he asks the woman for a drink, the woman sends him on his way. Every time Neddy gets into a swimming pool now, he nearly collapses with exhaustion and an impending sense of melancholy. Almost home Neddy stops at a large party at one of the neighbor's houses. The neighbors are incredibly rude and Neddy can hear them talking about him behind his back. They discuss how Neddy had lost everything. The money is gone, the house is for sale and the children are incorrigible. Neddy is baffled by this and thinks that the neighbors are confused. Neddy has a great life, a successful life.

At long last, Neddy is home. It is obvious that the children are not at home. Neddy walks up the drive to the front door. Suddenly Neddy sees that the house is completely empty and the doors are locked.

"The Fourth Alarm" is the story of the narrator and his wife, Bertha. The couple has a nice life in the suburbs of New York City. When the children are old enough to go to school, Bertha decides to get a job as a sixth-grade social studies teacher. Because of this, Bertha often spends time at an apartment in the city. In order to fill her spare time Bertha joins an amateur theater group. Bertha is very excited about the theater group and becomes deeply involved. The narrator is pleased by the fact that Bertha has found an interesting hobby and often attends parties with her, which he enjoys.

One day Bertha comes home from the city and tells the narrator that she has auditioned for a part in a nude play. The narrator is stunned and isn't sure how to handle the situation. Finally, the narrator is completely at a loss, and attempts to discourage Bertha from appearing in the play. Bertha's mind is made up. Bertha gets a part in the play and quits her job. The narrator decides to seek a divorce and visits a divorce lawyer. There



is no precedent in New York for divorcing your wife for appearing in a nude play and the narrator is stuck.

Although none of the couple's friends and neighbors has talked about the play, the narrator is sure everyone else has seen it. The play runs for about a month before the narrator goes to the theater. The narrator attempts to have an open mind about the entire experience, although it is difficult.

After the play, the cast demands that everyone in the audience take off their clothes. The narrator goes along with it, but once nude the man discovers that he has no place to put his wallet and car keys. There is no other choice but to carry the items in his hand. Once the narrator reaches the stage, people began to ridicule him about carrying the items. The man explains that he needs these items and cannot afford to lose them. The narrator is ridiculed to the point that he gets dressed and leaves the theater. Although the experience may have made some people lose their inhibitions, it has the opposite effect on the narrator, who is perfectly content with his belongings and way of life.

## Chapters 53-61 Analysis

Charlie Mallory is a man with a very linear line of thought, which perfectly fits his occupation as a freelance engineer. The idea of using geometry to decipher and repair relationships seems absurd, yet Charlie seems to be able to make it work. As a result, the man is much happier. It takes Charlie a while to realize that there are too many inconsistencies in his relationship with Mathilda, and that perhaps the relationship may not be able to ever right itself. In the end, Charlie realizes that death is more in proportion than his relationship with Mathilda, and he dies.

Neddy Merrill seems to be a successful and vibrant man. The decision to swim across the county seems kind of silly to everyone, but Neddy thinks it will be an exciting adventure. About halfway there Neddy is becoming very tired and considers giving up the journey. Neddy's enthusiasm and strength wane fairly quickly, and it becomes apparent that the man is not nearly as happy and successful as one might think. The closer Neddy gets to home, the more people gossip obviously knowing more about the Merrill situation because of the proximity of their houses. At this point is obvious that Neddy is in serious denial about his misfortune. The final realization comes when Neddy gets home and finds that the family home has been vacated, and he has been locked out.

The story of Bertha and the theater is quite humorous. Bertha seems to be going through a sort of a mid-life crisis. Although the narrator objects to his wife acting in a nude play, he seems to take it in stride after a while. It is obvious that Bertha has finally found herself and as a result, so has her husband.





# Characters

## Joan Harris appears in Torch Song

Joan Harris is a woman from the Midwest who moved to New York City in the mid-1930s. About the same time, Jack moved from the same city to New York where he met Joan. Eventually, Jack began to refer to Joan as the Widow, because she was always dressed in black and carried an air of grief. The friends often meet after work for drinks, and it seems that Joan is always looking for something unattainable. Joan intends to become a model but soon realizes that she does not photograph well and takes a job as a hostess. The narrator describes Joan as a "big, handsome girl with a wonderful voice" whose face had a gentle beauty. Despite the goings-on in Joan's world, the woman was always innocent and convivial. After Joan is promoted to an executive job, she and Jack hardly see one another.

Joan begins to associate with men of unsuitable character. These men seem to prey on Joan, and routinely she takes them in and suffers the men's abusive behavior from verbal threats to physical abuse. The situations always turn out for the worst. The men are usually alcoholics or junkies. Joan takes to buying drugs for one of her boyfriends. Joan becomes pregnant and has an abortion. The boyfriend leaves her and Joan is stuck in a vicious cycle of wanting something she cannot have.

This behavior continues to go on with Joan until her reputation is destroyed. It got to the point that Joan gives up the last of her respectability and hocks her grandmother's jewelry. Jack goes on with his own life and the next time he sees Joan, she has fallen on hard times. Joan continues to be incorrigible, and even after she and Jack a serious fight. Joan is not deterred.

## Evarts Malloy appears in O City of Broken Dreams

Evarts Malloy is a middle-aged man from the Midwest town of Wentworth, Indiana. Malloy and his family live an average life. Things take a drastic turn when Malloy shows the play he has written to a New York producer. Malloy never thought anything would come of the play but decided that he had to write about a local, older woman with a salty character and a snake farm.

Malloy shows his naïveté when the family takes a trip to New York City to meet with the producer. Malloy attempts to be savvy and is suddenly embarrassed by his wife's innocence. Malloy's behavior begins to change, particularly after he meets with the producer. Malloy is star struck, and obsessed with being introduced to New York society; he soon begins to elevate above his station.

The bellboy at the hotel convinces Malloy to visit an agent, and consequently, the agent talks Malloy into dumping the producer for something better. This goes against Malloy's





principles, but by this time, the man is completely caught up in the possibilities of fame and stardom.

Malloy finally gets his wish to gain the wisdom of the old woman from his hometown when he spots her on the street. Malloy gets his comeuppance when the woman says she's going to sue him for libel. At first, Malloy and his family decide to return to the Midwest but soon rationalize that he may be able to make his fortune in California despite the assault on the old woman's character.

## **Irene Westcott appears in The Enormous Radio**

Irene Westcott is the wife in "The Enormous Radio," a tale of a woman who becomes obsessed with eavesdropping on her neighbors.

## **Renee Hall appears in The Sutton Place Story**

Renee Hall is a thirty-something woman that develops a friendly relationship with Deborah Tennyson.

## **Deborah Tennyson appears in The Sutton Place Story**

Deborah Tennyson is a little girl who is cast off onto the housekeeper and becomes friends with Renee Hall.

## **Paul Hollis appears in Summer Farmer**

Paul Hollis is a businessman that tends to a farm at the family's country house.

## **Clarissa Ryan appears in The Chaste Clarissa**

Clarissa Ryan is the outcast daughter-in-law to a stuffy, wealthy family who becomes an obsession with Baxter, a notorious womanizer.

## **Jim Clancy appears in Clancy in the Tower of Babel**

Jim Clancy is an Irish immigrant who works as the elevator operator in an upscale New York apartment building.

## **Cash Bentley appears in O Youth and Beauty!**

Cash Bentley is an ill tempered, former high school track star obsessed with his past.

## **Blake appears in The Five Forty-Eight**

Blake is a businessman who has an inappropriate romantic liaison with his secretary and then dumps her, not knowing that the woman is mentally unstable.



## Objects/Places

### **New York City** appears in **O City of Broken Dreams, Torch Song**

New York City appears in the majority of Cheever's stories including "O City of Broken Dreams," "Torch Song," "The Sutton Place Story," "Clancy in the Tower of Babel," and "The Enormous Radio."

All of these stories take place in the 1920s and 1930s in various sections of the city. Some characters live in Greenwich Village and midtown Manhattan; others live in tenements, and still others live in more upscale locations such as Sutton Place. New York City has a mysterious air about it in this era, and the focus of many of the characters revolves around going out in the city, from dinner to drinks to dancing to the theater.

Most of the people in Cheever's stories, particularly those that live in New York, tend to be more liberal than the rest of the country. The women seem to have more opportunities and do not rely on their husbands for everything. This is especially clear in "The Fourth Alarm" when Bertha joins one of the many amateur theater troupes in the city and becomes fascinated with new and exciting adventures and experiences, including public nudity.

New York City is the ultimate backdrop for the short story because there is such a great deal of depth and character to be tapped into between business people, residents, and tourists.

### **Montraldo, Italy** appears in **Montraldo**

Montraldo, Italy is a seaside town that has seen better days in regards to the economy and tourism. Regardless of the somewhat shabby conditions there are still two major resort hotels, both of which are initially shunned by the narrator. Instead, the narrator decides to rent a room in a picturesque but slightly rundown villa located on top of a cliff overlooking the water. Many of the places in Montraldo are a bit behind the times and the villa has no running water. As are many cities in Italy, Montraldo seems to be sinking, although the narrator seems to find the erosion as a sort of spiritual event.

The village has little to offer a tourist beside the beaches and cafés, and the narrator does become somewhat bored. Every day at four clock in the afternoon there is a gathering in the town square, featuring a group of musicians dedicated to Dixieland. The music is a strange choice yet is enjoyed by all.

The narrator's impatience is shown by the slowness of the people in the town, particularly when it comes to retrieving the priest to give last rites to the Signora.



Eventually, the villa loses its charm. The narrator has seen enough of the seaside resort and travels back to America.

## **Sutton Place appears in The Sutton Place Story**

Sutton Place is an upscale part of New York City, home of the Tennysons.

## **Wentworth, Indiana appears in O City of Broken Dreams**

Wentworth, Indiana is the hometown to Evarts Malloy.

## **Pemaquoddy Inn appears in The Hartleys**

Pemaquoddy Inn is the site where the Hartleys go on a winter skiing vacation.

## **Laud's Head, Massachusetts appears in Goodbye, My Brother**

Laud's Head, Massachusetts is a coastal location where the Pomeroy family summer home exists.

## **Holly Cove appears in The Chaste Clarissa**

Holly Cove - Location of the Baxter and Ryan summer homes.

## **Limerick, Ireland appears in Clancy in the Tower of Babel**

Limerick, Ireland - Original home to Jim and Nora Clancy

## **Greenwich Village appears in Torch Song**

Greenwich Village is a liberal and artsy part of New York City.

## **Rome appears in Boy in Rome, The Duchess**

Rome is the capital city of Italy, known for traditional values, religion, art, and architecture.



## Social Concerns And Themes

The Stories of John Cheever brings together material from five earlier collections in addition to four previously uncollected stories initially appearing in the New Yorker. The stories are chronologically arranged, covering the years from 1947 to 1978, and together demonstrate Cheever's gift to enlist the people, places, and objects of modern society for the purposes of art.

Cheever first gained notoriety as a short story writer and despite sojourns into the novel continued to nurture his craft throughout his career. With stories such as "The Enormous Radio," "Torch Song," and "The Pot of Gold," Cheever early established a reputation for utilizing an urban setting to explore the lives and loves of city dwellers filtering in and out of mostly fashionable East Side apartment houses. However, within the best of these early stories, Cheever began to introduce thematic concerns that would define his fiction throughout his career. One such theme, best illustrated in "The Enormous Radio," is that beneath the surface of appearance often lies a disturbing if not dangerous element that manifests itself without a character's consent and beyond his control. In another story "Goodbye, My Brother," Cheever focuses on family relationships, especially those between brothers. The story is also significant for observing the destructive forces of discontent and loneliness within characters compensating for their inadequacies by self-pity or striking out at the uncaring world around them.

Later, in stories such as "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill," "The Country Husband," and "O Youth and Beauty," Cheever would exchange city lights for affluent suburbia. This would become "Cheever country," home of the manicured lawn and the unkept bed, the perfect martini, and the imperfection of daily living. Deeply concerned with the relationship between the individual and society at large, Cheever continued his exploration of a world seemingly secure and respectable being gradually infiltrated by creeping hypocrisy and ambivalence. Extremely important in these stories is the setting of Shady Hill, certainly one of Cheever's finest creations. Shady Hill possesses the dominant qualities of Cheever's suburbia: superficiality, conformity, and repression. However, in typical Cheever fashion, the bleak artificiality of existence is generously peopled, and "Cheever people" possess an inherent capacity for survival.

Cheever continued to experiment with both narrative and subject material in stories such as "The Death of Justina" and "The Golden Age." Of importance is that Cheever's tone over the years seems to darken, perhaps because the increasing complexities of the contemporary world offered Cheever less opportunity to celebrate true optimism for his characters. Consequently, in more recent stories such as "Clementina," "The Angel on the Bridge," and especially "The Swimmer," the focus seems more pessimistic, often contrasting the demands of social and economic security with the emotional insecurity of characters in a spiritual metamorphosis.

In retrospect, despite the difficulty of finding just cause for celebration in the modern world, Cheever maintained a distinct sensitivity and romantic affinity for his characters

locked in mortal combat to preserve fading youth, beauty, and dignity. For Cheever, the art of fiction was a vehicle to test the current of human emotions and to pass judgment on the folly of mankind, yet beneath the wave of dissatisfaction Cheever ultimately empathized with his characters, offering comfort rather than recompense.

## Techniques

Recognized by critics for his development as an artist and experimentation with form, Cheever is adversely noted for the tremendous consistency of style and structure in his stories. An extremely descriptive writer, Cheever possessed a remarkable ability to create a sense of character and place. He repeatedly demonstrated a technical discipline and control over his creativity while producing an intimate, concerned, and often disapproving tone toward his subject material. As a writer, Cheever presented a comic vision of the world circumvented by nostalgia, irony, and ominous tension.

Ranging from simplistic sketches to well-developed narrative, Cheever's stories present numerous shifts in point of view. Whether speaking as an omniscient narrator, a twelve-year-old child, or directly to the audience as himself, Cheever created a common language to communicate his observations and ideals. In addition, he developed extremely likable characters demanding sympathy and respect and unlikable characters worthy of scorn and remorse. Criticized for being sentimental and unwilling to "disturb us enough," Cheever is also cited for his tendency to resort to contrived, often implausible circumstances to resolve the action of his stories. However, most critics and readers are willing to overlook technical limitations and appreciate the stories for their entertaining and enlightening value.



# Themes

## Familial relationships

John Cheever has a fantastic insight into familial relationships. That makes his short stories feel true and real. One of the best examples is "Goodbye, My Brother," which tells the tale of the Pomeroy family. Mrs. Pomeroy has instilled the importance of family into her children and works hard to create a peaceful and comfortable atmosphere for all, even when the situation may be difficult. The relationships among the four children ring true with loyalty and jealousy—equal parts of tolerance and intolerance. Mrs. Pomeroy hates to hear criticism of the children, even from one another, because she doesn't get to see them very often. No matter how old or accomplished one becomes, each person is in some ways still viewed as a child. Lawrence's choice to alienate himself from the rest of the family is insulting and yet not completely unexpected. The familial relationships between the siblings are intricate and well presented.

It is clear that the children do not instill the same type of good behavior in their children as was instilled in them. At least three of the small children in the house are disobedient and overly rambunctious. The parents say nothing of this behavior, and while the other siblings and even Mrs. Pomeroy, resent the behavior, nothing is said.

## Excess

There is a great deal of excess throughout many of the stories from eavesdropping to men to money to booze. The characters excess usually leads to things taking a turn for the worst, if not to utter destruction. In an "Enormous Radio," Irene Westcott becomes obsessed with the lives of neighbors as she listens to the eavesdropping radio. This obsession and excessively negative behavior causes a once happy and peaceful woman to become a hysterical prude.

Probably the best example of excess is shown in "Torch Song" the story of Joan Harris. Joan is desperately searching for herself and that missing "something," to the point of desperation. To compensate for her lack of fulfillment, Joan commits herself to excess in the form of booze and even more so to inappropriate men. The result is a life that is running off the tracks. Joan loses nearly everything that was once important to her and often finds herself seeking comfort from Jack, a friend who accepts Joan without judgment.

Another example of excess can be seen in "The Sutton Place Story." Mr. and Mrs. Tennyson are so completely caught up in their own lives that they virtually ignore their small daughter. The excess in the Tennyson's lives revolves around socializing to maintain a specific social standing and to maintaining a comfortable lifestyle.





## Morality

Many of Cheever's stories are set in the 1920s, a paradoxical time regarding morality. There are many characters that still practice a fairly strict moral code, while others are taking advantage of the newfound liberation of the "roaring twenties." The best example of strict morals is in "Clancy and the Tower of Babel." Clancy is a strict Irish Catholic who goes to church religiously and does his best to live a good, moral life. Clancy is outraged that one of the residents is gay. Homosexuality is a sin, an aberration against God. Clancy feels so strongly about morality that his job as an elevator operator is jeopardized. While Clancy never comes to accept the relationship of Rowantree and Bobby, the man does learn that one's own moral code may not apply to everyone and that there are times when it is best to remain silent.

Tolerance can be seen in "Torch Song" regarding Jack's acceptance of Joan's behavior. All around Joan people are making moral judgments to the point of shunning her for allegedly immoral behavior, while Jack only cares about Joan's, safety and well-being.

In "The Sutton Place Story," Mrs. Harley believes in strict morality and has issues with taking care of Deborah on Sundays when she would rather be at church. Although Mrs. Harley claims to be an honest moral woman, she sees no problem in lying to the Tennysons about leaving Deborah with Renée on Sunday mornings. In this way, Cheever shows that many people have separate behaviors for others than they do themselves.



# Style

## Point of View

A majority of the works are presented in third person omniscient. This is a particularly accurate viewpoint when setting is of great importance to the story. Third person allows Cheever to give the reader great insight into the sights and sounds of the city and to develop a sense of personality and vision regarding each character.

There are some cases in which the third person is the only plausible choice, such as "The Sutton Place Story", where the author relates the experiences of Deborah Tennyson, the little girl, and that of her housekeeper, parents, and friends. The reader gets a solid picture of Deborah's precociousness and attempts to get the attention of her parents.

The use of the third person is crucial in the story titled, "The Worm in the Apple." This point of view, lends a great deal of humor to the piece as the narrator obviously sees the family in a much different light than most. Although all the assumptions and interpretations of the family's life are incorrect, Cheever manages to give the reader a solid picture of the family's real life.

One of the examples of the first person point of view exists in "Goodbye, My Brother." The story is told by one of the four Pomeroy children. The use of the first person in this case is very effective because it explores the strained and universal dynamic between four siblings that don't always get along.

## Setting

Although the majority of the stories take place in various parts of New York City there are few references to specific landmarks that may be known to the reader. The author does mention some universally recognized places such as Fifth Avenue, Greenwich Village, and Tiffany's.

The author gives the reader insight into life in the city, particularly that of the middle to upper class. Various situations and settings include cocktail parties, fancy dinners, and penthouse apartments.

There are several stories that take place, at least in part, on a ship sailing from America to Europe. In two of the stories Italy serves as the backdrop. One of the locations is Torino and the other is Montraldo, both seaside resorts and temporary escapes for the characters.

The theater is referred to in "The Fourth Alarm" as the narrator goes to see his wife Bertha in the nude play. The author expects some small but grand theater, only to be disappointed by its dirty and run down façade. The theater is nothing like that of the



man's youth. The main arch has been destroyed and scattered around the theater is a collection of old tires. The only things remotely resembling a theater are the aisles and seats.

## Language and Meaning

The language and meaning used throughout Cheever's collected stories reflects on the times in a minimal way. It is clear that the people in the stories live in the 1920s and 1930s, as they speak of particular events such as Prohibition. Cheever does not use a great deal of slang or any language that would date the work in a negative way.

Cheever is a master of language and is not afraid to exercise his vocabulary. There is a marked absence of sex, violence, and vulgarity throughout the stories, and it is rare to see any use of profanity. This may be because many of these stories made their debut in the *New Yorker*, which was, at the time, a family publication that could not print anything profane or even strongly suggestive.

The stories were written mostly after World War II, and it is easy to see the progression of the work, both in structure and language. The language is more formal in the beginning of the collection and becomes looser toward the end. It is not so formal as to avoid conversational English and contractions, as many works of that time are prone to do.

## Structure

The *Stories of John Cheever* is a collection of short stories written after the end of World War II. There are a total of 61 stories. The shortest story is 2 pages in length; the longest story is 21 pages in length. The average number of pages in a chapter is 11. There are 693 pages in total.

The only noticeable structure in the collection is that the stories are presented in the chronological order in which they were written. As they were originally produced for the *New Yorker* magazine, each story has the feel of a complete, condensed vignette. Because the stories are presented in chronological order, there is a sense of maturity that grows as the reader moves from one story to the next. In this way, the reader has the opportunity to grow along with the writer and the characters presented in the stories.

Most of the stories revolve around couples or families that are never quite what they seem to be. Many of the characters are built around a sense of discomfort or self-doubt. Cheever structures the characters and scenes in such a way as to build the reader's interest and depth of understanding. Even when the ending is surprising or ironic, the reader is able to grasp the entire concept with ease.



## Quotes

"Irene shifted the control and invaded the privacy of several breakfast tables. She overheard demonstrations of indigestion, carnal love, abysmal vanity, faith, and despair."

"

37

"She cried for herself, she cried because she was afraid that she herself might die in the night, because she was alone in the world, because her desperate and empty life was not an overture, but in ending, and through it all she could see the rough, brutal shape of a coffin."

70

"It is true of even the best of us that if an observer can catch us boarding a train at a way station; if he will mark our faces, stripped by anxiety of their self-possession; if he will appraise our luggage, our clothing, and look out of the window to see who was driven us to the station; if he will listen to the harsh or tender things we say, if we are with our families, or notice the way we put our suitcase onto the rack, check the position of our wallet, our key ring, and wipe the sweat off the back of our necks; if he can judge sensibly, the self-importance, diffidence, or sadness with which we settle ourselves, he will be given a broader view of our lives than most of us would intend."

88

"The apartment house was not far from the slum tenement where James and Nora had lived since their marriage, but financially and morally it was another creation, and Clancy at first looked at the tenants as if they were made out of sugar."

118

"There is no sense in looking for trouble, but in any big, true picture of the city where we all live there is surely room for one more word on the diehards, the hangers-on, the people who never got along and who never gave up, the insatiabiles that we have all known at one time or another."

148

"Then the old man would seem happy - with a kind of merriment, that his enemies would never have believed him capable of. It would last until the tears rolled down his cheeks."

182

"Sometimes she'd seem sober enough even to a stranger, but I could tell in a second by the way she spoke her words that she'd drunk enough not to be herself anymore."

199



"She talked about sex when they were alone. Russell had got the idea that her chastity was of great value, and he was the one who had to be persuaded, but then he lost his head quickly and went up the back stairs to her room."

223

"For lovers, touch is metamorphosis."

279

"Charlie can hear the voices from the bar at the end of the passageway, and he has told his story, but he does not stop writing."

301

"There are times when the lines around the human eyes seem like shelves of eroded stone and when the staring eye itself strikes us with such a wilderness of animal feeling that we are at a loss."

336

"The boozy guardian angel, her hair disheveled and the strings of her harp broken, still seemed to hover over where he lay."

369

"Women's hair curlers, like grass dye and funny signs, only seem to me reminders of the fact we must find more serious and finer things up on which to comment, and I will only say that my wife wears so many and such bellicose hair curlers that anybody trying to romance her would lose an eye."

478

## Adaptations

Although the film rights for the Wapshot novels and *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill* (1958) have been purchased, the only film made from Cheever's work has been *The Swimmer* based on the short story by the same title (produced by Frank Perry and Roger Lewis, directed by Perry and Sydney Pollack and written in collaboration with his wife Eleanor Perry, released by Columbia/Horizon/Dover in 1968). Created with typical Hollywood fanfare, starring Burt Lancaster, Janice Rule, and Kim Hunter, the film was considered too abstract for popular audiences and dismissed by most critics. In general, Cheever was dissatisfied with the Perrys' treatment of his story.

More successful were the three Cheever stories dramatized in 1979 for PBS television as part of the "Great Performances" series. Selected by Peter Weinberg of WNET in New York with Cheever's approval, the dramatizations included "The Sorrows of Gin," adapted by Wendy Wasserman, "O Youth and Beauty," adapted by A. R. Gurney, Jr., and "The Five-Forty-Eight," adapted by Terrence McNally.



## Topics for Discussion

How might the Malloys lives have changed if Evarts' play had been produced in Manhattan?

What do you think would have happened to Renée if Deborah had not been found?

Why is Clarissa hesitant to spend any time with Baxter? Discuss.

Do you think Clancy should have been fired for refusing to take Mr. Rowantree and Bobby in the elevator?

Do you think that Anne Hartley might have lived if she hadn't been so desperate to get her father's attention? Explain.

Although Ralph Whittemore finally realized the value of his family, do you think he continued to search for the pot of gold?

What do you think would have happened to Ruby if Amy had confessed to dumping the bottle of gin down the kitchen sink?

Why was Charlie's loneliness during the Christmas season so much different than that of the apartment building's residents?



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