The Swimmer Study Guide

The Swimmer by John Cheever

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Contents

Introduction

John Cheever's "The Swimmer" was published in 1964 in the short story collection *The Brigadier and the Golf Widow*. Cheever once stated this story was originally meant to be part of a novel and was pared down from over 150 pages of notes. He also stated that he originally intended to write a story that paralleled the tale of Narcissus, a character in Greek mythology who died while staring at his reflection in a pool of water. However, the author eventually found the retelling of this myth too restrictive. As published, this critically acclaimed story takes place in the affluent suburbs of Westchester County, New York, and focuses on Neddy Merrill. Though no longer a young man, Neddy wants to retain his youth and believes that he is a vibrant individual and something of a hero. In an attempt to blaze new trails, he decides to find a new way home. When the story opens, Neddy is at a cocktail party and realizes that by following the chain of private and public pools in his affluent community, he can literally swim home. Praised for its blend of realism and surrealism, the story is respected for its dreamlike and nightmarish aspects, as well as its thematic exploration of suburban America and the life cycle. Critics admire Cheever's commentary on affluence, hypocrisy, and the relationship between wealth and happiness in "The Swimmer," along with his use of myth and symbolism.

Author Biography

John Cheever was born in Quincy, Massachusetts, on May 27, 1912. He attended the private Thayer Academy but was expelled before graduating, an experience that became the basis for his first story, "Expelled," in 1930. Cheever subsequently pursued a writing career, contributing work to various publications, including *The Atlantic, The Yale Review, and The New Yorker*. During this period, he supported himself with odd jobs, including writing book synopses for the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film studio. In 1941 he married Mary M. Winternitz, with whom he eventually had three children.

Cheever served for four years in the army during World War II, and it was during this time that he had his first book of fiction, *The Way Some People Live* published. After the war, Cheever found work as a scriptwriter, producing scripts for television series including *Life with Father*. Cheever also began teaching after the war, and during the course of his lifetime he taught at such institutions as the University of Iowa, Boston University, Barnard College, and Sing Sing Prison. Cheever published his second work of fiction, The Enormous Radio and Other Stories, in 1953 to critical acclaim. Cheever's 1978 collection The Stories of John Cheever received the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award, and prompted serious scholarly interest in his works. Other collections of short fiction by Cheever include *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill and Other Stories, Some People, Places and Things That Will Not Appear in My Next Novel*, *The Brigadier and the Golf Widow*, (which contains his story "The Swimmer"), and *Thirteen Uncollected Stories by John Cheever*. Cheever died of cancer June 18, 1982.

Plot Summary

"The Swimmer" opens on a humorous note: it "was one of those midsummer Sundays when everyone sits around saying, 'I drank too much last night,'" the narrator says. It is a beautiful summer day, and a large white cloud "like a city seen from a distance" is on the horizon. Neddy Merrill, a slender and young-looking man, sits beside the pool with a glass of gin. He decides that he could "reach his home. .. eight miles to the south ... by water." He can swim home via the pools of the inhabitants of the suburbs where he lives. He names the string of pools the "Lucinda River " after his wife Lucinda.

This is not such a strange idea for him to have, the narrator reveals, because "he was ... determinedly original and had a vague and modest idea of himself as a legendary figure." Beginning at the Westerhazys' pool, he embarks upon his journey. The next pool he reaches is the Grahams', where Mrs. Graham gives him a drink. He remains there until some friends of the Grahams arrive from Connecticut, at which time he slips away. Arriving at the Hammer house, he swims through their pool undisturbed, as he does at the Lears'. The Howlands and Crosscups are away, and he swims their pools easily.

At the Bunkers' house, he runs into his first obstacle: a party with a caterer and "caterer's men in white coats." Detained there for time enough to have a drink, he then proceeds to the Tomlinsons' and crosses their pool. The next house, belonging to the Levys, has been the scene of another party— though no one is currently around—and Neddy pours himself another drink after crossing their pool. He feels "tired, clean, and pleased."

As he sits at the Levys1 house, a storm breaks. He sits in their gazebo and waits it out. After the storm, he crosses the Lindleys' riding ring to the Welcher house and the next pool. The pool is empty, however, and "this breach in the chain of water disappointed him absurdly." The Welchers seem to have gone away; indeed there is a FOR SALE sign on a tree out front. His bad luck continues when he crosses Route 424, cold and wet, and the cars will not stop to let him by. After he finally gets across, he arrives at Lancaster's Recreation Center, where he must cross the crowded pool. The water there is much less pleasant than in his friends' pools, and he has to wash his feet "in a bitter and cloudy solution." When it is discovered that Neddy does not have proper identification, the lifeguards throw him out of the pool.

Ducking through the fence, he escapes to the Halloran estate. He tells the Hallorans about his quest. Mrs. Halloran responds: "We've been *terribly* sorry about all your misfortunes." Neddy asks what she means and she continues: "we heard that you'd sold the house and that your poor children. ..." Neddy insists that everything is fine and continues on. At the Hallorans' daughter's house he is unable to get a drink because they have given up alcohol. Moving on, he arrives at the Biswangers'. They are having a party but treat him as a gate crasher because he has snubbed them in the past. He has a drink and leaves. The next house belongs to "his old mistress, Shirley Adams." She refuses to lend him any money, although he does not ask, and he swims her pool and leaves.

On the last leg of his journey, Neddy begins to feel intensely cold and tired. He cries because he cannot understand why the people on the last half of his journey have been so rude to him. He swims the last two pools and finally arrives home exhausted. However, his house is dark and locked and he does not have the key. His wife, whom he was expecting to be home, is not there, and the story ends with Neddy pounding on the door of his own house and shouting, only to find that the place is empty.

Summary

This story opens on a midsummer Sunday, one in which "everyone sits around saying 'I drank too much last night,'" from churchgoers, the priest himself, golfers and tennis players, to the leader of the Audubon Group.

Donald and Helen Westerhazy and Lucinda and Neddy Merrill are sitting by the Westerhazy's pool. Neddy, a youthfully slender man, slid down the banister and jogged to the dining room for coffee. He then sat dipping his hand in the water of the pool, his other hand around a glass of gin, having just gone swimming. Neddy thought about his own house, eight miles to the south, where his four daughters were likely playing tennis.

Neddy made the geographic "discovery" that a map of swimming pools constituted a stream through which he could swim home. He considered himself to be quite brilliant and decided that he would name it after his wife - the "Lucinda River." Neddy hurled himself into the pool, contemptuous of those who did not dive in. He did a flutter kick, not good for long distances, but because in his part of the world it was customary. He felt like swimming was a natural condition, and would have liked to swim in the nude. However, his project precluded that.

Neddy ran across the lawn, thinking of all the neighbors who were his friends that he would encounter along the way. He happily thought himself to be an explorer. First, he found himself at the Graham's pool. Mrs. Graham told him it was a nice surprise that he was there, as she had been trying to call him. She offered him a drink. Neddy thought to himself that like any explorer, he would need to appease the natives. However, he also felt that if he were to make his trip, he had no time to waste. Thus, he was happy when other friends arrived and he could slip away.

Next, Neddy arrived at the Bunker's pool, where a party was in progress. Caterers served the guests cold gin. Enid Bunker spotted him and began to scream her pleasure at what a nice surprise it was to see him. He shook the hands of some men and women, and was given a drink by a smiling bartender whom he had seen at many other parties. Neddy was anxious to continue his journey, and when he seemed about to be surrounded by people, he dove in the pool. After swimming across, he got out and jogged up the garden path and down the driveway. Though he didn't want to be seen on the road in his swim trunks, there was no traffic, and he made it to the Levy's driveway.

At the Levy's, it appeared that they had only recently left, as there were glasses, bottles, and nuts laid out. Neddy had a drink (it was his fourth or fifth) and realized he had swam nearly half the Lucinda River. He was pleased at everything, including having this moment to be alone. A storm began and Neddy loved storms. They excited him and seemed to bring good news and cheers. He stayed in the Levy's gazebo until the storm passed.

The rain had cooled the air and Neddy shivered. The wind had knocked some red and yellow leaves from a maple tree. Neddy was saddened at this sign of autumn. He

crossed the Lindleys' riding ring, which was surprised to find overrun with grass and the jumps dismantled. He knew he had heard something about this, but couldn't remember what.

Neddy arrived at the Welcher's pool, which was drained; this disappointed him greatly. He noticed that the Welchers had definitely gone away. He spotted a "For Sale" sign. Neddy couldn't remember exactly, but it seemed that just a week ago he and his wife had regrettably declined an invitation to dine with them. He asked himself if his memory was failing or "had he so disciplined it in the repossession of unpleasant facts that had damaged his sense of the truth." The sounds of a nearby tennis game let him forget the overcast sky and cold air and steeled him for his journey.

Neddy began the most difficult part of his journey. Anyone seeing him standing alongside Route 424, barefoot and nearly naked, might have wondered if he were "a victim of foul play, had his car broken down, or was he merely a fool." He stood amidst beer cans and rags. When crossing the road, drivers laughed and threw a beer can at him. Neddy was suddenly struck by the seriousness of his task, but felt that the distance he had come made return impossible.

After taking fifteen minutes to cross the road (waiting on the grass divider for an opening), Neddy came upon the Village Recreation Center. Here, there were loud, shrill, harsh voices. Neddy felt met by regimentation; he had to shower and wash his feet in a cloudy and bitter solution. The pool itself looked like a sink, stinking of chlorine. Lifeguards blew "police whistles" and "abused the swimmers through a public address system." Neddy thought longingly of the Bunker's sapphire water and "thought that he might contaminate himself - damage his own prosperousness and charm - by swimming in this murk." He reminded himself that he was an explorer and persevered, even as he was bumped into and splashed while crossing the pool. Lifeguards shouted at him for not wearing an identification disk. Neddy ignored them and continued on his way.

Neddy crossed the road and entered the Halloran estate. Mrs. Halloran was reading the paper and Mr. Halloran was clearing leaves out of the pool. The Hallorans always swam in the nude, so Neddy did as well. Mrs. Halloran said she was sorry to hear of his misfortunes. Neddy asked her what she meant. Mrs. Halloran said "why we you heard you sold the house and that your poor children..." Neddy said he didn't recall selling the house and that his daughters were at home. He thanked them for the swim and Mrs. Halloran wished him a nice trip.

Neddy put his trunks back on. They were loose and he wondered if he could have lost weight over the course of an afternoon. He was tired and achy; the trip was too much for him. He felt cold to the bones, as if he would never be warm again. Leaves fell from the trees; he smelled burning wood and wondered who would be burning wood at that time of year. Neddy decided he needed a drink to warm and pick him up - to "refresh his feeling that it was original and valorous to swim across the county." Neddy reminded himself that channel swimmers took brandy.

Neddy stopped at the Sache's house. Helen Sachs, the Halloran's daughter, told Neddy that since her husband's (Eric) operation, they hadn't kept anything in the house to drink. Eric's operation had been three years earlier. Neddy wondered if he had lost his mind and wondered if his "gift for concealing painful facts had allowed him to forget that he had sold his house, that his children were in trouble, and that his friend had been ill." He gazed upon Eric, who had long abdominal scars and no navel. Helen suggested that Neddy try the Biswanger's, who were having a party that could be heard in the distance.

Neddy, feeling he had no freedom of choice about his mode of transport, swam across the Sache's cold pool, gasping and close to drowning. He made his way over to the Biswanger's. The Biswangers invited Neddy and his wife to dinner four times per year, but they were always rebuffed. Neddy noted that the Biswangers did not understand how society worked - they discussed the price of things over cocktails, exchanged market tips at dinner, and told dirty stories in mixed company. They were not "Neddy's set" and were not on his wife's Christmas list.

When Neddy approached, Grace Biswanger said loudly that there was a "gate crasher." Neddy knew she couldn't hurt him socially and so didn't flinch. He asked for a drink. Grace told him to suit himself, as he didn't pay attention to invitations, and turned her back on him. Neddy requested a whiskey; the bartender served him rudely. Neddy wondered at this, as in his world, caterers knew about social standing, and "to be rebuffed by a part-time barkeep meant that he has suffered some loss of social esteem." Neddy wondered if the man was new and uninformed. He overheard Grace say, "They went for broke overnight - nothing but income - and he showed up drunk one Sunday and asked us to loan him five thousand dollars." Neddy thought to himself how she was always talking inappropriately about money. He dove into the pool, swam across it, and left.

The next pool on Neddy's list belonged to his old mistress, Shirley Adams. He thought to himself that she would surely cure any pain or injury he had suffered. He couldn't remember when they had had their affair - he had broken it off. Neddy felt he had the upper hand and approached with confidence. He felt about the pool the way he did about his lover: that he enjoyed it with an authority unknown to holy matrimony. Upon viewing her, Neddy felt no profound memories. He felt it had been a light-hearted affair, even though she had cried when he broke it off.

Shirley appeared confused to see him and asked what he wanted. Neddy told her he was swimming across the county. She asked him if he would ever grow up, and told him that if he had come for money, she wouldn't give him another cent. Neddy asked for a drink but Shirley told him she wasn't alone. Neddy swam the pool, but when he tried to haul himself up on the curb as he usually did, he found he had lost his strength. Thus, he paddled to the ladder and climbed out.

Neddy saw a man in the bathhouse and smelled an autumn fragrance. He looked at the stars and wondered what had become of the midsummer constellations. Then he began crying for the first time in his life. He could not understand the rudeness of the barkeep or his former mistress. His nose and throat were sore from swimming for so long.

Neddy thought to himself that he needed a drink, company, and some dry clothes. He could have gone straight home, but instead he went to the Gilmartin's pool. For the first time in his life, he did not dive but took the steps into the icy water. He swam a "hobbled side stroke that he might have learned as a youth."

Staggering, Neddy continued onto the Clyde's and swam their pool, stopping many times along the way to rest. He climbed up the ladder and wondered if he were strong enough to get home. Neddy realized that he had indeed swum the county, but due to his exhaustion, "his triumph seemed vague."

Neddy stopped and held onto gateposts for support as he went up the driveway to his house. His house was dark and he wondered where his family was. The thunderstorm had knocked one of the rain gutters loose and Neddy thought he would fix it in the morning. Neddy realized the door was locked. He thought the stupid cook or maid must have locked it, then remembered they hadn't had either a maid or a cook for awhile. He shouted and pounded on the door; then realized the house was empty.

Analysis

John Cheever was an American writer who grew up in Massachusetts and lived from 1912-1982. He won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, despite having never graduated from college. Cheever was an alcoholic and closeted homosexual. Commonly known as the "Chekhov of the Suburbs," his stories often reflected on people's spiritual and emotional emptiness.

This short story was written in the third-person limited omniscient point of view. In other words, it was written in the third person, but the narrator had knowledge of all of Neddy's thoughts, impression, and sensations.

Setting played an important role in this short story. Cheever used the seemingly idyllic suburban setting as a contrast to Neddy's inner turmoil. Neddy himself derives his identity from his place in suburban society, and the niceties and advantages that go along with it. He tries to delude himself that suburbia is a cocoon of sorts, protecting him from all that is unpleasant. He likes to view the county as a world unto itself, which he can swim from one end of the other of, while being welcomed with open arms by various friendly homeowners. He likes the idea of a world where friendly neighbors invite him in, bartenders know and respect his face, and he is permitted to swim in sapphire pools rather than crowded, dirty public pools.

Weather, too, is used as symbolism for the storm raging inside Neddy. Summer for him represents all that is happy and peaceful in the world. On the other hand, cold and rain are foreboding, representing a threat to his personal circumstances. Cheever cleverly uses weather throughout the story, with cold and rain, even mere chills, to represent Neddy's fear and doubt about what his life has come to, despite the fact that Neddy tries to convince himself that the sun is warm and the suburbs are alive with summer pool parties. Overcast skies, rain cooling the air, leaves falling from trees, and mysterious

wood burning are all symbols of unwanted memories lurking in Neddy's memories. As Neddy nears home, the Gilmartin's pool is icy, indicative of the end of midsummer constellations and Neddy's "summer vacation," so to speak.

Alcohol is also used as an escape mechanism and a way for Neddy to dull his emotions and forget things. Whenever he starts to waiver or feel depressed, it is time for a new home and to ask his host or hostess for another drink. Drinking is a social convention that is ingrained in Neddy's self-perception and a means of coping.

For the majority of the story, Neddy has chosen to retreat into a childlike state. At the opening of the story, he slides down a banister. He is described as "a youthfully slender man." He does a child's flutter kick, one that is more form than substance, and is an apt symbolic depiction of character. Like a child, he opts to "make-believe," fancying himself an explorer. He prides himself on his ability to dive into the pool and climb out without use of a ladder. Neddy imagines himself a channel swimmer, thus entitled to "take brandy." He has a short attention span, jogging down paths and his thoughts being diverted by the sounds of nearby tennis games.

Throughout the story, Neddy's physical state reflects his mental state. He tries to be young and careful, energetically diving into pools and running down driveways. However, he develops chills and fatigue, which he tries to mask with more alcohol. Eventually, the alcohol sources dry up though, and he is left utterly exhausted. By the end of the story, he is hobbling and staggering.

Neddy has led a charmed life, shaped by social mores. For this reason, his view of the world is shattered when he is snubbed by a bartender and rebuffed by the Biswangers, who he believes can't hurt him because they are socially beneath him. He finds their talk of money to be crass, conveniently forgetting that he has gone to them for money in his desperate times. Further, he takes his former mistress for granted, viewing her as a pliable constant, to whom he can return for fun and more money whenever he likes. That she has turned her back on him is completely inconceivable to him.

Cheever uses irony to show how Neddy, though a somewhat sympathetic character, is far from innocent. He humors friends to get drinks with a sense of entitlement. He has repeatedly snubbed the Biswangers, but is shocked when they do the same, and despite his previous poor treatment of them, was not above asking them for money. Barkeep are servants who need to show him respect and do his bidding. He cared nothing for his mistress and could not understand why she cried when he broke it off. In addition, he had the audacity to ask her for money and to come by uninvited and expect to be catered to. The rudeness of these people is inconceivable to him, as he is so accustomed to being treated in a certain way.

Several times Neddy brushes against the "real world" with uncomfortable and embarrassing results. He attempts to cross a busy road in just his swimming trunks, no doubt looking a sight and capturing the derision and ridicule of passersby. He worries that he will be tainted and contaminated, his wealthy luster tarnished, by swimming in the public pool. He fails to follow their rules and can't understand why the lifeguards are

yelling at him. These are not rules he has lived his life by, and thus he has no regard for them.

The question with respect to Neddy's swimming expedition is whether he is swimming toward something or swimming away from it. He appears compelled to push onward, and even notes at various points that the trip that started out as a lark had become serious, with no turning back. It appears to be a distraction, a means of avoiding his life and the real issues at hand. While he pushes on to avoid his thoughts, eventually, his travels must come to an end. He tries to avoid it; his visit to the Gilmartin's home is a divergence from his requisite path. Eventually, his trip ends, and he is confronted with his abandoned and empty former home. Despite his attempts at insulation, cold harsh reality has set in.

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Characters

Shirley Adams

Shirley Adams is Neddy's former mistress. When Neddy arrives at her home, she is shocked by his presence and warns him that she will not lend him any money. She is with a younger man.

Grace Biswanger

Grace Biswanger is hosting a party when Neddy arrives and is angered by his presence, calling him a gate-crasher. Grace regularly invites Neddy and his wife to her parties, but they consistently decline. Neddy and his wife consider the Biswangers socially inferior. Grace reveals that Neddy is broke and has attempted to borrow money from her and her husband.

Enid Bunker

Enid Bunker is an acquaintance of Neddy's and Lucinda's. She and her husband are hosting a pool party that Neddy interrupts on his swim home. Neddy and his wife were invited to the party but decided not to attend it. Enid is subsequently surprised and happy to see Neddy there, and she detains Neddy on his journey by giving him a drink, assuming that he has come tq join the festivities.

Mrs. Halloran

Mrs. Halloran is the mother of Helen Sachs and is one of Neddy Merrill's friends whom he encounters on his swim home while she sits next to her pool reading *The New York Times*. She and her husband are elderly and rich. They are also something of nonconformists. They prefer to swim in the nude and are rumored to be communists. Mrs. Halloran is the first character in the story to mention Neddy's recent misfortunes, all of which Neddy denies.

Lucinda Merrill

Lucinda Merrill is Neddy Merrill's wife. It is after her that Neddy names the stream of pools that he has "discovered." She, like Neddy, is active in their neighborhood's social circle. Because of her relationship with the Biswangers, it is implied that she and Neddy are somewhat snobbish and unwilling to associate with the "wrong" sort of people. When the story opens, she speaks her only line: "We all *drank* too much."

Neddy Merrill

The protagonist of "The Swimmer," Neddy Merrill, has a young, active, and playful spirit. He is described as having slid down the bannister earlier in the day even though he is approaching middle age. He is also likened "to a summer's day, particularly the last hours of one, and ... the impression [he made] was definitely one of youth, sport, and clement weather." He sees himself as something of a heroic figure and explorer and decides to swim home through the chain of pools in his suburban neighborhood. His wife is named Lucinda, and he has four daughters. He and his wife are active in their neighborhood's social circle and attend numerous parties. They have also declined to attend several functions, which has offended some of then-acquaintances and resulted in their gaining a snobbish reputation. As this surreal tale unfolds, however, Neddy is additionally described or portrayed as lonely, miserable, fatigued, and either forgetful, senile, or disoriented. He is also in financial trouble and has had extramarital affairs. His status as a hero is considered ironic.

Eric Sachs

Eric Sachs is the husband of Helen Sachs and a friend of Neddy's. Eric has given up drinking due to an operation he had three years earlier. He still has scars on his stomach from this operation.

Helen Sachs

Helen Sachs is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Halloran and the wife of Eric Sachs, a friend of Neddy's. She is unable to give Neddy the drink that he requests; Eric had an operation three years ago, after which they both stopped drinking. Helen's comments mystify Neddy, who does not remember that her husband had an operation. Neddy subsequently begins to doubt his memory. Kind and hospitable, Helen directs Neddy to a party at a nearby neighbor's house where he can get a drink.

Themes

Affluence

Set in an affluent county in suburban New York, "The Swimmer" comments on the wealth associated with the upper classes of American society. The beginning of.the tale opens with Neddy Merrill at a cocktail party on a pleasant midsummer afternoon. He has a drink in one hand and is dangling his other hand in a backyard swimming pool. Although pools are frequently considered a luxury by most people, in this community they are commonplace. In fact, pools are so prevalent in his neighborhood that Neddy can make the eight-mile journey home by swimming. The wealth of Neddy and his neighbors is reinforced by the fact that one of them even has a riding range that Neddy must cross on his journey home. The affluence of the upper class is also reflected in Neddy's and his friends' predilection for□and ability to afford□ parties. At the story's beginning, Neddy's wife and friends are complaining about the previous night's party at which they had too much to drink. Furthermore, on his journey home, Neddy attends other parties, all of which are catered. In an ironic reversal, however, by the tale's end it is revealed that Neddy is in financial trouble.

Appearance vs. Reality

Despite the financial well-being of Neddy's circle of friends, their situations are not necessarily happy or hopeful. Critics have noted that their parties represent the emptiness of contemporary American society and the meaningless and hypocrisy of the middle and upper classes. For example, Neddy tries to gain a sense of accomplishment and to recapture his youth by swimming home□an act that he considers meaningful, but one that is bizarre and of no real importance. The happiness supposedly associated with wealth is also elusive. Friends continue to offer their sympathies about Neddy's recent financial misfortunes, and the domesticity associated with suburbia is shattered when it is revealed that despite his happy marriage to Lucinda, Neddy has had an affair with one of his neighbors, Shirley Adams. The hypocrisy suggested by Neddy's affair is also reflected in his relationship with the Biswangers. Although repeatedly invited, Neddy and his wife refused to attend the Biswangers' parties because they associated with the wrong sort of people. These people include real estate agents, veterinarians, and eye doctors; although all these individuals are trained and respected members of the community, they do not fit into the Merrills' social group.

Alienation and Loneliness

Neddy's affair and the circumstances surrounding his arrival home reveal an ultimate loneliness and alienation that are considered major themes of "The Swimmer." Other details in the story also reflect this thematic emphasis. Neddy, for example, is snubbed and treated as a gate-crasher at the Biswangers' party. Of the homes he encounters on

his journey, several are locked up, and one house is even vacant and for sale. Also, at the story's conclusion, Neddy arrives home, but instead of finding his wife and daughters, he discovers that his house is dark, locked, and empty.

The Life Cycle

The life cycle and the passage of time are also prominent themes of "The Swimmer." When the story begins, Neddy, who is described as being near the prime of his life, decides to affirm his vitality by swimming home. At first his journey goes smoothly. He does, however, run into various obstacles, represented by physical challenges (hedges, gravel paths, highways, and the like) as well as by people, the various friends and neighbors he encounters. As he progresses on his journey, he grows more fatigued and is struck by the loneliness of his situation. Cold and miserable (and a little drunk), he even considers giving up the journey. During the course of his trip, Neddy also becomes less and less sure of his abilities and memories. Friends offer their consolations about his recent misfortunes, but he denies that there is anything wrong. It is, however, unclear whether Neddy is merely denying that something is wrong or whether his memory has failed him. Appearing cold, tired, miserable, and alone at the end of the story, Neddy stands in sharp contrast to the vibrant man who began the swim home at the story's onset. The passage of time is also reflected in the story in a surreal way in its focus on die seasons. When Neddy's begins his swim, it is a beautiful and warm summer day. By the end of the story, he has encountered a terrible storm and the temperature has dropped drastically. Furthermore, the leaves have started to turn and are beginning to fall in preparation for winter.

Style

Allegory

' "The Swimmer" is often considered an allegory about decline, the aging process, and the life cycle. An allegory is a symbolic representation through characters or events of truths or generalizations about human existence. In allegories, people, places, and events often have more than one meaning—that is, they can stand for more than one thing. As such, allegories relate a surface story and a "hidden" story that focuses on other issues. The surface story of "The Swimmer" concerns the protagonist's swim home. The hidden, allegorical meaning of "The Swimmer" has to do with aging, physical decline, the life cycle, and the hypocrisy of the upper classes. Parables and fables are often considered types of allegories.

Point of View

The point of view of' "The Swimmer" is one of the most intriguing aspects of story. Because it is told completely in the third person ("I" constructions are not used), the reader is never able to get inside Neddy Merrill's mind. This adds to the confusion of the story. For example, when friends try to console Neddy about his recent misfortunes, he denies that anything bad has happened. As a result of this narrative strategy, the reader is unable to decide whether Neddy is telling the truth, lying, deluding himself, or if he is simply disoriented.

Hero/Heroine

The concept of the hero is another important aspect of "The Swimmer." In a certain sense, Neddy, as the protagonist of the story, is the hero of the story. He even views himself as something of a hero or a legendary figure. This view of himself as larger than life accounts, in part, for his desire to find a new way home. Swimming home is something that has not been done before, and his success will only add to his worth as a hero. "The Swimmer" also draws parallels between Neddy and characters appearing in other works of fiction. Many critics note that Neddy's journey shares many similarities with the journey of the hero as depicted in classical mythology, particularly with Odysseus in Homer's *The Odyssey*,

Irony

Irony is another important aspect of the "The Swimmer." Irony is a literary technique that attempts to highlight the opposite meaning of a situation. Cheever's portrait of the hero, for example, is ironic. Instead of being vibrant, successful, and young—qualities often associated with heroes— Neddy is eventually portrayed as old, fatigued, weak, miserable, confused, lonely, and disoriented. He has been snubbed by acquaintances

and seems to have forgotten various details about his life. Swimming through a series of pools is also not the great undertaking Neddy assumes it is. His homecoming is also considered ironic; homecomings for heroes are typically joyous occasions. Neddy's return to his home, which is empty, dark, and locked, is disheartening.

Dream Vision

Neddy's tale is often considered a modification of the dream vision, or a story in which the main character falls asleep and dreams the events in the story. Dream visions are often filled with surreal, fantastic, and illogical events that make it difficult for the reader to discern what really is happening. Washington Irving's tale about Rip Van Winkle is an example of a dream vision. In Irving' s story, Rip falls asleep for several years and, upon waking, learns that things have changed drastically. In Cheever's version of the dream vision, Neddy is not said to have fallen asleep, but he similarly ages considerably during his surreal journey. Within the span of an afternoon, Neddy grows older, can no longer trust his memory, and finds that the seasons have changed. As in dreams, time does not have meaning and events seem illogical for Neddy.

Names

The meanings of the names mentioned in "The Swimmer" are considered significant. The name of Levy, for example, brings to mind the word levee, a word associated with water. Likewise, the Welchers' pool is empty; as welshers, they have disappointed Neddy by not having water in their pool and living up to their "word." Neddy's desire to get home to his wife and warm home is reflected in his wife's name, Lucinda, which means light. Several other names given in the story are related to water. For example, Merrill means "sea-bright"; Lear means "dweller by the sea"; the Clyde is a river in Scotland; and Halloran means "stranger from beyond the sea." The name Lear also brings to mind the Shakespearean king who lapsed into madness and lost his belongings and family. Critics have noted that names like Hammers, Bunkers, and Crosscups foreshadow violence, and that the owners of the pools that Neddy encounters in the first half of the tale are largely of Anglo-Saxon descent, much like Neddy. The names that are mentioned in the second half of the story, during which Neddy becomes more and more alienated, are more ethnically diverse.

Historical Context

"The Swimmer" was published in 1964, at a time of great prosperity for middle- and upper-class Americans. Having survived World War II, which ended in 1945, and the Korean War, which took place in the 1950s, many Americans—at least white Americans—were enjoying the wealth and affluence of the postwar era. It was during this time that the American suburbs, the setting of "The Swimmer," grew at a rapid pace. This world of the upper classes is the world of Neddy Merrill as he appears at the beginning of "The Swimmer."

Neddy Merrill's world was in no way, however, one to which most Americans had access. The civil rights movement was active, and basic liberties were still an issue of great concern for many Americans. Although slaves had been freed as outlined in the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and slavery was abolished in 1865 with the enactment of the Thirteenth Amendment, many African Americans continued to be denied their civil rights. The civil rights act issued in June 1964 was intended to end this discrimination. Despite the progress that the passage of this bill symbolized, the problems faced by women and many minorities were not immediately resolved. Various other "rights" movements were also active in the early 1960s. The environmental movement gained much momentum in 1962 with the publication of Rachel Carson's Silent Spring. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) shed much light on the problems faced by American women.

Critical Overview

"The Swimmer" is recognized as one of Cheever's best short stories and explores themes that are considered typical of his fiction as a whole. In this story, which is set in an affluent community, Cheever chronicles the morals, rituals, and hypocrisy of the upper class through his focus on Neddy Merrill, who is, at the beginning of the tale, a vibrant man with a home, a wife, and four beautiful daughters. The story opens with the protagonist Neddy, his wife, and some friends sitting around a pool complaining that they had too much to drink the previous night. Furthermore, when the protagonist tries to do something new—something heroic and legendary—all he can come up with is to swim home through a chain of 16 pools. The hypocrisy of Neddy's situation becomes more evident as the tale unfolds. It is revealed that Neddy and his wife are something of snobs; they only associate with the "right" kind of people. Additionally, the illusion of Neddy's wealth and happy domestic life is shown to be fleeting and illusory. If the events that Cheever describes are to be taken at face value and accepted as true, it is revealed, at the story's end, that Neddy's marriage has been shattered by adultery, that he is financially broke, and that he has lost his home and children. In this manner, this American Chekhov of the suburbs has been recognized as providing yet more insight into the upper strata of American society, proving the adage that money and power can't buy you happiness. Indeed, for Neddy, privilege breeds unhappiness and empty actions. Furthermore, Neddy is so wrapped up in his own life, heroism, and desire to keep up with—and surpass—the proverbial Joneses that he cannot even admit to himself and to others that he is having a string of bad luck.

"The Swimmer" has also been praised by critics as a dream vision and a thematic exploration of decline and the life cycle. When the story begins, Neddy is a youngish) and vibrant man who desires to do something legendary—though he hopes to accomplish this through the meaningless act of swimming home. As the story progresses, he becomes more fatigued. Critics note that this is reflected in the story on a textual level; Neddy completes the first part of the journey in record time, but the crossing of a busy highway—at which point he is feeling and looking horrible—is revealed through numerous lines of text. (In other words, the pace of the story slows as Neddy's energy level does.) Similarly, the reader learns that friends that are Neddy's age, notably Eric Sachs, are no longer the images of good health that they once were. Eric, for example, has had to give up drinking for health reasons. Neddy's denial of his problems—and confusion about his friends' statements and behavior—can also be seen as signs of senility. Even Neddy's surroundings reflect this deterioration. When the story begins, it is a temperate, sunny day in early summer. During the course of Neddy's journey, which supposedly takes places in a matter of hours, the weather turns cold, storms take place, flowers associated with the autumn are seen, and the summer constellations disappear. It must be noted, however, that although this tale succeeds as an allegory about one man's physical decline, its surreal qualities contribute to the story being interpreted as a dream (or nightmare). The seasons cannot logically change within the course of day, nor can a man age in the course of one afternoon. Critics note that Cheever's blending of realistic and surrealistic detail and use of the third-person

narrative enhance the reader's experience of the tale and the story's ability to work on various levels.

The symbolism and irony of the tale have also been praised by critics. Many critics note that one of the story's strongest points is its use of mythology and focus on the hero. Like Homer's Odysseus, Neddy undertakes a voyage by water to get home. Neddy's obstacles, however, pale in comparison to those of Odysseus; Neddy only has to deal with gravel paths, drunken friends, a busy highway, empty pools. Other characters in the story also find their counterparts in Odysseus's tale: his wife, Luanda, can be seen as Penelope; Shirley Adams as Circe; the Bunkers as the Sirens; and the various party-goers as the lotus-eaters who try to dissuade the hero from his objective. The highway and public pool that Neddy must cross have similarly been likened to the rivers Lethe and Styx. Critics have also noted similarities between other classical heroes, including the character Dante in *La divina commedia* (c. 1300; The *Divine Comedy*), and other myths, including those of the Fisher King and the Holy Grail. Neddy's journey is, however, told ironically. His quest is of relatively no importance, and his homecoming is presented as less than hospitable. Critics note that the closer that Neddy gets to home, the more alienated and troubled he becomes. The trivialness of Neddy's quest is often interpreted as further commentary on the meaningless lives of the American upper-class.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Greg Bamhisel is an assistant instructor and assistant director of the Undergraduate Writing Program at the University of Texas at Austin. In the following essay, Bamhisel discusses the major themes of "The Swimmer."

On a literal level, "The Swimmer" is the story of one man's initially fanciful, ultimately quite serious adventure swimming through every pool in the county on his way home. On a deeper level, though, the story alludes to some of Western literature's most enduring themes. Neddy Merrill, Cheever's hero, is Odysseus, Dante, the Fisher King, a knight of King Arthur. Through his story of a man's exhausting journey home, Cheever examines themes of dissociation, alienation, and the loss of purpose.

"The Swimmer" examines the plight of a character familiar to readers of Cheever's fiction. Along with John Updike and J. D. Salinger, Cheever is one of the famous trio of "*New Yorker* authors" of the 1940s through the 1960s (Cheever published a total of 121 stories in the *New Yorker* magazine), and he quickly became well-known for chronicling the lives of New York professionals and suburbanites. "The Swimmer" appeared during a period in which Cheever's own alcoholism was bringing a dark tone to his writing.

Neddy Merrill, the story's hero, is "far from young" but not yet middle-aged— "he might have been compared to a summer's day, particularly the last hours of one." Incipient darkness and age is everywhere in the story, haunting the apparently idyllic summer day on which the story takes place. The setting is the well-to-do Westchester County suburbs of New York City, where the towns and villages divide themselves up along very strict lines of class, religion and national origin. The weekend parties and barbecues, and their carefully delineated guest lists, are the social milieu in which these divisions play out, and Neddy seems quite at home there.

When the story begins, we see Neddy in the middle of the most desirable party, the Westerhazy's. He feels comfortable in his surroundings— "his life was not confining," the narrator tells us—but he has "a vague and modest idea of himself as a legendary figure." To accomplish what he sees as his modest contribution to the tradition of mythical figures, he decides to make the eight-mile journey home from the Westerhazy' s not by car, as would be customary, but by water. He will swim "that stream of swimming pools, that quasi-subterranean stream that curved across the county." He names the stream "Lucinda" after his wife and departs.

The gently humorous irony of Neddy's quest draws attention to one of Cheever's enduring concerns: the lack of transcendent meaning, or even of base importance, in the lives of the privileged in the middle of the American century. Cheever's men are troubled by their lack of purpose, and often channel this frustration into alcohol (and Neddy drinks at least five times during his trip home). On first reading, it seems to the reader that it is a slightly drunken fancy that leads Neddy to embark upon his quest.

Neddy's project is, though, quite serious. Cheever originally intended Neddy to call to mind the Greek mythological figure of Narcissus, the beautiful youth who saw his reflection in a pool and kills himself trying to unite with his image. "When I began," Cheever is quoted as explaining in Patrick Meanor's *John Cheever Revisited*, "the story was to have been a simple one about Narcissus... .Then swimming every day as I do, I thought, it's absurd to limit him to the tight mythological plot—being trapped in his own image, in a single pool."

Perhaps the strongest parallel Cheever's story has is to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in which the poet travels into the depths of Hell in order to learn more about the purpose of human existence. Like Dante, as Neddy journeys on he reaches ever more perilous reaches of the county. The trip begins at the Westerhazys, then continues on through the friendly estates of the Grahams, the Hammers, the Lears, the Howlands and the Crosscups. Neddy's first trial is at the Bunker house, where a party is in full force. Greeted warmly by the hostess and many of the guests, Neddy is forced to delay his voyage. He moves on to the Tomlinson place and then to the eerily deserted Levy house, where rain stops him for a time.

The next house, the Welchers', presents him with a disappointment: their pool has been drained, and the house is for sale, although Neddy cannot remember hearing any such thing about them. Neddy feels the first pains of his voyage—-"was his memory failing?"—but then reaches his next test: the highway, where shivering he withstands insults and a flung beer can from passing motorists. "He seemed pitiful.... Why was he determined to complete his journey even if it meant putting his life in danger?" Finally across the highway, he then reaches the most difficult test: the public pool. The water is foul-smelling and acrid and murky, and the pool is crowded. The lifeguards demand he leave the pool, and he escapes.

Just as Dante survived the horror of the Inferno only to be confronted by the tests of Purgatory, Neddy still has to endure a few more hardships before arriving home. The Halloran pool is welcoming, but for the first time we hear about Neddy's own problems: "We've been *terribly* sorry to hear about your misfortunes," Mrs. Halloran sympathizes. He then stops at the Biswanger house, where he is regarded as a gate-crasher because of his own repeated social snubs of them, and finally at the house of Shirley Adams, "his old mistress." She, too, makes reference to Neddy's recent difficulties. Once Neddy makes it through the Inferno, therefore, the perils become less external and more internal. Not only is he now cold and tired, but the people he encounters allude to his own unspecified troubles.

Unfortunately for Neddy, the end does not bring a glimpse of Beatrice and the sacred rose. His arrival home does not bring him to the light (the name Luanda is derived from the Latin for "light"): "the place was dark." All of the unidentified troubles now confront the traveller, and he can no longer escape them. The Dantean equivalence also is complicated by Neddy's inward-directed focus during the story. Where Dante eagerly questions the inhabitants of the various levels of Hell, Neddy is either unaware of or uninterested in the people he meets along the way.

Another appealing parallel for Neddy is the Homeric hero Odysseus. Like Odysseus, Neddy takes a leisurely, roundabout trip home, stopping his journey in places. Many of the characters in "The Swimmer" then fall into the Homeric structure: Lucinda is Penelope, Shirley is Circe, Mrs. Bunker represents the Sirens, her party symbolizes the Lotus-eaters, and the Biswangers stand for the Cyclops. And like Odysseus, Neddy also faces another trial once he actually returns home before he can be reunited with Lucinda.

Critics have also compared Neddy to Washington Living's Rip Van Winkle and Neddy's journey to that of the knights of the round table. Rip's twenty-year sleep is a counterpart to Neddy's journey, and Neddy's repression of his problems during his swim reminds us of Rip's status, upon waking, as a "man out of time." Both men confront their final fates uncomprehendingly. Neddy can also be seen as Jesus, the pools as his Stations of the Cross. Shirley's comment to him reinforces this interpretation: "Good Christ. Will you ever grow up?" However, perhaps the most apt parallel for "The Swimmer" is the King Arthur Holy Grail myth. Enduring numerous perils, the knights (and Neddy) are questing for something they don't fully understand. Even the name of one of the pools Neddy traverses, the Crosscups, alludes to the holy chalice of Jesus.

The image of the drinking-cup refers back, in turn, to the constant drinking in which Neddy and his friends engage. Although critics seem most eager to trace out the story's mythical allusions, it would be irresponsible not to grant that Neddy's confusion at the end of the book could simply be the result of an alcoholic's denial and memory loss. Neddy's vision of himself as "a legendary figure" could also result from his drinking, as could the strange pattern of time-passage in Neddy's mind. In his book *John Cheever Revisited*, Patrick Meanor holds that "Cheever's time warp in "The Swimmer' is explainable as a symptom of the serious physical, mental, and spiritual disintegration caused by prolonged alcoholic drinking."

Whether Neddy is our century' s equivalent of a hero, trying to carve out a mythical legacy in a banal environment, or whether he is simply a delusional alcoholic trying to make his life seem more exciting, conclusions can only be drawn ultimately from Neddy's own perceptions. The narration is strict third-person limited—the narrator is not Neddy himself, but refers to Neddy as "he" and does not have access to all of Neddy's thoughts and feelings. Some critics have seen this limitation as a problem. Ultimately, the reader does not get to know Neddy very thoroughly and since the precise nature of Neddy's "misfortunes" is unclear, it is difficult for us to judge his actions.

However, Cheever achieves a greater complexity in his story by this self-imposed limitation. When Neddy arrives home and the house is not only empty but in disrepair, the reader is confused: is Lucinda just late? Do the Merrills still live there? Are the Merrills even still married? If we see Neddy's quest as a drunken one, then perhaps he only imagined Lucinda's presence at the Westerhazys' party. In this view, his "troubles" could be with his marriage—it is known that Neddy had a mistress. Drunk, he thinks he is still married, and only when he arrives home does cold, dark, wet, sober reality confront him. By not revealing the actuality of the situation, Cheever creates in his readers the confusion of the alcoholic. Read on a mythical or a literal level, "The

Swimmer" is a powerful evocation of the loss of a sense of purpose among America's privileged class in particular and among twentieth-century people in general.

Source: Greg Barnhisel, for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Research, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Bell compares Cheever's "The Swimmer" to Shakespeare's A MidsummerNight's Dream and analyzes some of the story's dream imagery.

The opening paragraph of John Cheever's "The Swimmer" establishes the common malady lingering poolside at the Westerhazys' that midsummer Sunday. "We all drank too much," said Lucinda Merrill. While the others talk about their hangovers, Neddy Merrill sits "by the green water, one hand in it, one around a glass of gin." Apparently instead of talking, Neddy "had been swimming and now he was breathing deeply, stertorously as if he could gulp into his lungs the components of that moment, the heat of the sun, the intenseness of his pleasure." Debilitated by his hangover and his swim, warmed by the hot sun and cold gin, his deep breathing resonant with heavy snoring sounds, Neddy slips into the most natural condition given the circumstances: he falls asleep. His pleasure invents a dream of heroic exploration which ends with a desolate vision within a midsummer's nightmare.

The invitation to transform A *Midsummer Night's Dream* into "a midsummer's nightmare" is tempting, first, because Cheever's references to midsummer seem insistent. The story begins, "It was one of those midsummer Sundays...." About the midpoint, after the wind has stripped the Levys' maple tree of its autumnal leaves, Neddy reasons that "since it was midsummer the tree must be blighted. .. ."Near his journey'send, under a winter sky, Neddy wonders, "What had become of the constellations of midsummer?." A further link to the play is the mystifying confusion of the seasons.

The spring, the summer, The childing autumn, angry winter, change Their wonted liveries; and the mazed world, By their increase, now knows not which is which (H1.111-14)

The transformation seems more than ironic wordplay when we consider another connection to Shakespeare: Cheever's observation that Neddy "might have been compared to a summer's day, particularly the last hours of one...." Despite his impression of "youth, sport, and clement weather," Neddy is not a likely subject for a sonnet, at least not for Sonnet 18: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? / Thou art more lovely and more temperate." Alcoholic, snobbish, adulterous, self-indulgent—Neddy is by no means mild or temperate, yet he is linked to the sonnet. He is the other subject of the poem, the inevitability of decline.

Thus, he is compared to the last hours of a summer's day because, like the season, Neddy's "lease hath all too short a date." As "every fair from fair sometime declines, / By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed," so Neddy's "eternal summer"—his illusory youthful vigor and, more important, his illusion of success, his share in the tenuous American dream— will also fade. Whether or not he has actually lost his money and status, his house and family, in the context of his dream he seems to have lost "possession of that fair [he] owest." As his pilgrimage to that realization ends, we sense that Neddy has indeed wandered through the valley of the shadow.

The dream motif (and its direction) having thus been suggested, Neddy snores beside the pool; "the components of that moment... seemed to flow into his chest." Here the narrative becomes internalized in Neddy. The dream itself begins and, with it, the "implied progression from day to night, summer to winter, vigorous manhood to old age,"

The surrealistic quality of dreams insinuates itself throughout Neddy's journey. With his "discovery " of the Lucinda River, we see that superior point of view of the dreamer, suspended, detached, not quite real: "He seemed to see, with a cartographer's eye, that string of swimming pools, that quasi-subterranean stream that curved across the county." Removing "a sweater that was hung over his shoulders" (had it been hung there by someone else?), he plunges into the stream of his subconscious. "To be embraced and sustained by the light green water ... seemed," to Neddy, to be "the resumption of a natural condition"; the dreamer floats on waves of sleep like the swimmer buoyed by light green water.

When Neddy hears the Bunkers' distant poolside party, "the water refracted the sound of voices and laughter and seemed to suspend it in midair," distant, disembodied voices made nearer by the trick of water and physics. It is one of those phenomena of reality that make us recall the dream distortion of sound as well as place and time. When he leaves the Bunkers', "the brilliant, watery sound of voices fade[s]," as if he leaves some bright sanctuary to pursue his darkening journey. Near the Lancaster public pool, "the effect of the water on voices, the illusion of brilliance and suspense, was the same ... but the sounds here were louder, harsher, and more shrill___" The distortion will recur at the Biswangers' with even harsher effects.

Another illustration of the dream motif is Neddy's sense of separation and detachment. As he surveys the scene at the Bunkers' pool, including the red de Haviland trainer "circling around and around and around in the sky with something like the glee of a child in a swing," he "felt a passing affection for the scene, a tenderness for the gathering, as if it was something he might touch." The ambiguity of *the v/ordpassing* is effective, Neddy's "passing affection" may be only transitory; his nightmare will show that what he holds dear is indeed fleeting. But given the tenderness with which he regards his own life and this scene of "prosperous men and women," passing suggests rather convincingly its archaic sense of "great" or "surpassing." For the moment he is held outside that circle rather like Hawthorne's Robin Molineux when the boy views his family gathered for vespers under the spreading tree in their dooryard. But the door will not be shut in Neddy's face—not just yet, for he enters this scene as a welcome guest and greets his fellow players (or playfellows) in a dizzying round of kisses and handshakes, even though the thunder has sounded.

"I had the strangest dream last night I was standing on the shoulder of Route 424, waiting to cross, and I was naked...." So Neddy, on some other day, waking from some other dream, might well have recounted that common dream image. But his vulnerability and exposure in this afternoon's dream will probably not be another amusing anecdote told at breakfast. When he reaches the highway, he is "close to naked," naked enough to be "exposed to all kinds of ridicule," but perhaps not naked enough to perceive any

truths beyond his discomfort and his perplexing inability to turn back. He is genuinely naked when he steps out of his trunks and through the Hallorans' yellowed beech hedge to encounter something closer to the naked truth when Mrs. Halloran says,

"We've been terribly sorry to hear about all your misfortunes, Neddy,"
"My misfortunes?" Ned asked. "I don't know what you mean."
"Why, we heard that you'd sold the house and that your poor children..."
"I don't recall having sold the house," Ned said, "and the girls are at home."

Neddy's first response seems natural enough, yet when Mrs. Halloran begins to tell him precisely what she does mean, he interrupts her. Like unsettling, bright pinpoints of truth abruptly piercing an alcoholic black-out, her explanation hints at sharp truths that must ultimately be faced. Neddy's reply seems more an evasion than an answer, the suppression of a dark truth's glimmering. It also suggests the illogical, if not absurd, utterances of dreams.

To discern truth from within or without a dream is difficult enough, but to discern the dream itself from within is more difficult. For Neddy, it is impossible. Unprepared for the humiliation along Route 424, he is bewildered, but "he could not go back, he could not even recall with any clearness the green water at the Westerhazys', the sense of inhaling the day's components, the friendly and relaxed voices saying that they had drunk too much." Caught powerless and unaware in a nightmare that now controls him, he can only swim with its current. At the Sachses' pool, he still feels obliged to swim, "that he had no freedom of choice about his means of travel." Just two pools from his own house, obligation has become compulsion: "While he could have cut directly across the road to his home he went on to the Gilmartins' pool" and then "staggered with fatigue on his way to the Clydes'."

It is in dreams that apple blossoms and roses are replaced with the "stubborn autumnal fragrance" of chrysanthemums or marigolds. It is in dreams that midsummer constellations become the stars of a winter sky, and slender, youngish Neddy Merrill goes "stooped" and "stupified" to whatever truth, whatever self-discovery, his nightmare has led him. "He had been immersed too long, and his nose and throat were sore from the water," a swimmer's complaint that might be shared by an afternoon sleeper whose snoring has been too long and loud, and whose dream is too frightening.

In A *Midsummer Night's Dream*, we are told that "the course of true love never did run smooth." Neddy's encounters with love would seem to bear witness. The easy familiarity with which he greeted his bronze Aphrodite that morning is rebuffed by Shirley Adams, his former mistress with "hair the color of brass." Despite Neddy's "passing affection," the course of his real love—his pursuit of the American dream of success and suburban happiness—runs no more smoothly.

Perhaps it too is besieged,

Making it momentary as a sound,

Swift as a shadow, short as any dream;

Brief as the lightning in the collied night,

That, in a spleen, unfolds both heaven and earth,

And ere a man hath power to say "Behold!"

The jaws of darkness do devour it up.

So quick bright things come to confusion (I i 143^19)

In the nightmarish ruin of the "quick bright things "in Neddy' s life, he has been led to the vision that his dream of wealth, status, and happiness is transitory, illusory, and fraught with perils. If our dreams are empty, what then are we? The use of that discovery, whether for reform or despair, is left to Neddy and to us. Perhaps he will mend his ways, or (as Prufrock fears) Neddy Merrill may awake from his watery dream only to drown—in one way or another.

Source: Loren C Bell, "'The Swimmer': A Midsummer's Nightmare," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol 24, No. 4, Fall, 1987, pp. 433-6.

Critical Essay #3

In the following brief article, Byrne discusses the symbolism of names in "The Swimmer."

Like modern writers as diverse as Joyce, Fitzgerald, and Barthelme, John Cheever found an artistic delight in lists, specifically a list of names: "It's perfectly beautiful. You can use an invitation list as a lyrical poem. A sort of evocation. I believe I've used it once or twice." One of Cheever's most anthologized stories, "The Swimmer," includes a list of names representing ports of call on Neddy Merrill's Sunday odyssey: "The only maps and charts he had to go by were remembered or imaginary but these were clear enough. First there were the Grahams, the Hammers, the Lears, the Howlands, and the Crosscups. He would cross Ditmar Street to the Bunkers and come, after a short portage, to the Levys, the Welchers, and the public pool in Lancaster. Then there were the Hallorans, the Sachses, the Biswangers, Shirley Adams, the Gilmartins and the Clydes." Like the famous litany of guests at Gats-by's parties, Cheever*s list is a carefully crafted narrative device, yet none of the critical commentaries on "The Swimmer" have scrutinized it. We do know that Cheever began the story as a novel and that, at one point, he had accumulated 150 pages of manuscript. Obviously, the finished work underwent a radical condensation of material. The list of names was one way Cheever provided concise symbolic resonance to the action. In fact, the list stands for Neddy's dilemma, writ small.

Even the most cursory attention to the names suggests that they were not selected randomly from the Ossining telephone directory. At the Westerhazys, where everyone is trying to shake off the mental fog of a hangover, Neddy decides to travel to his home in Bullet Park "by taking a dogleg to the southwest." But he will confront social and psychological violence and conflict, as "Hammers," "Crosscups" and "Bunkers" foreshadow. Like Lear, he will wander dispossessed across a landscape once friendly, now hostile, partly because he has been a "Welcher" socially, romantically and financially.

Cheever intensifies the theme of ostracism through his ethnic arrangement of the names. On the first half of the trek, Neddy Merrill (whose ancestry is English) finds full pools and hospitable neighbors (whose ancestry, English, German and one Scot speaks of long-established social position). One of them, Howland, can eyen claim to be a *Mayflower* descendant. At the Levys' (the halfway mark of the swim), however, the ethnic note changes, as does Neddy's reception. In this second lap, Neddy calls on two Jewish and two Irish neighbors; of these, the two neighbors Who are home genuinely care for and welcome him. Playing on the second string socially, they understand nonconformity and exclusion (the Hallorans, weekend nudists, are thought to be Communists). Of the English or German neighbors in this part of the story, two have no pools and two rebuff Neddy for his casual arrogance in dropping by. The Englishman turns into Wandering Jew.

Cheever slyly links this theme of social ostracism with aquatic nomadism through the meaning of some of these surnames. Merrill is "a descendant of Muriel ('sea-bright')." Welch means "the stranger"; Lear, "the dweller by the sea." Halloran (an Irish name) is "the stranger from beyond the sea." Neddy's penultimate stop is the Clydes, whose name is shared by a long, winding river in Scotland.

The swim finished, Neddy "climbed up the ladder and wondered if he had the strength to get home. He had done what he wanted, he had swum the country, but he was so stupified with exhaustion that his triumph seemed vague." In one of his short masterworks, Cheever's triumph was anything but vague, as his river of names makes clear.

Source: Michael D. Byrne, "The River of Names in 'The Swimmer'," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 23, No. 3, Summer, 1986, pp. 326-7.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Auser talks about the mythical aspects of "The Swimmer," and compares the story to the Odyssey, a legendary Greek tale.

Many critics and reviewers have long praised John Cheever as one of the most devoted craftsmen of the short story. Others have also noted his artful employment of myth, or mythic elements, to develop structure, character, or theme within his stories. In his anthology *The Brigadier and the Golf Widow*, the group of short short stories entitled "Metamorphoses" offers a good illustration of his use of mythic elements. It is in a separate story, "The Swimmer," however, that he has created an imaginative and vital myth of time and modern man.

If a reader employs the criteria of Professor Henry A. Murray in identifying modern myth creation, Cheever has been successful on all counts. His work is mythic for it is a "sensible symbolic representation of an imagined series of events." Cheever has not only used a contemporary suburban environment as a "mythic referent," but the story in its "emotive" and "convictional functions" creates indelible impressions on a reader and leaves him a "parable of wisdom."

Cheever uses the age-old themes of quest, journey, initiation, and discovery as he makes the story a commentary upon the times. Professor Frederick Bracher has perceptively noted how the tale combines the patterns of the Odyssey and "Rip Van Winkle." Ned Merrill, the central character, is a modern Ulysses of sorts, but he is a man who does not accept (by his refusal to confront) the harsh truth of time's passage. The story's concentrated and subdued drama and its significant theme inevitably recall Irving's narrative. It is peculiarly appropriate that this modern myth has its locale in the general Westchester area associated with Irving. And the apt epithet of "Ovid in Ossining" for Cheever in a *Time* cover story is justified as we read the story, for Ned undergoes a severe metamorphosis.

At one level, the story begins significantly on a midsummer Sunday when bibulous suburbanites are shaking off the effects of the previous night's drinking. It is a fuzzy world of hangover in which many utter regrets about having drunk too much. Ned Merrill, although not young, prides himself on both his youthful appearance and exuberance; he sits hugging a glass of gin by the poolside of a friend. Seeing himself in his illusions as something of a legendary figure, Ned decides to do something devotional to celebrate the beauty of the day and his own youthfulness. He reflects that his own home lies only eight miles distant and imagines that by stringing together a series of swimming pools of his neighbors and acquaintances, he might swim home by such a "river." In his whimsy he christens this stream "Lucinda" after his wife. Having committed himself to the test, he hurls himself into this suburban Alpheus to begin the journey home.

Cheever's description of the Westchester setting is distinctly credible, for he has an eye for selective details in just the right amount to maintain the "reality" and suggest the

"fantasy." Simultaneously, Cheever unobtrusively interweaves his pattern of myth. We feel the waters of the Lucinda River becoming symbolic of time's passage.

As Ned proceeds, he feels there is no greater reward than to accomplish the goal he has set for himself. In his intense quest, he feels like "a pilgrim, an explorer a man with a destiny." He feels too, that he moves in a beneficent world one made for his pleasure. But Ned does not proceed directly to his goal without interruption. Hospitality is offered by "friends" along the route; he rationalizes the temporary delays. As he continues to indulge his fancy, he buoys himself up by a recurring sense of conviviality—a drink at the Grahams and more drinks at the Bunkers, and so on. He still feels affection for the scenes through which he passes, even as thunder ominously sounds in the distance.

Reality sounds sharply when Ned hears the whistle of a train bringing him back at one point to ponder about what time it is. The autumnal coloring of the leaves against the darkness of a storm attracts his attention, but only momentarily. By such means Cheever adroitly expands and compresses time credibly.

With the progression of the journey from one pool to another, Ned finds his memory is obviously unclear; he merely "seems" to remember events. As he meets acquaintances along his route of travel and converses with them, he begins questioning his sense of truth—whether he has been unable to face unpleasantnesses along the "way."

The crossing of a main highway forces him to sense how ludicrous his position is. It is at this juncture in time that he reflects about returning. His early jauntiness has worn off; there is no feeling of the "legendary" any more, for the journey has become deadly serious. He still nurtures the picture of himself as explorer, His passage through the property of the Hallorans and his meeting them *deshabilles* symbolically reveal to him the unadorned truth, for they allude sympathetically to misfortunes which he cannot recall experiencing. His sense of time and his recollections are completely confused.

Ned physically now feels the concomitants of age—the heaviness of fatigue, a loss of weight and a coldness within the bones. He assures himself that whiskey will see him through the journey; but the way he is now treated by people at the last pools he has to swim makes him feel that he has undergone somehow a loss of social esteem. He is only tolerated. There is no longer any feeling of conviviality. As he passes through the property of his onetime mistress, she chides him scornfully about his inability to grow up.

When he finally emerges from the last pool, he is miserable and exhausted. Literally and figuratively, Ned knows he has been "in the swim" too long. His own home is dark; the locks on the doors are rusty. As he peers through the windows of the house, he discovers that it is empty.

As mythopoeist, Cheever has employed the river and water to represent the flowing of time, the passage through phases of life. The sun's setting and the seasonal changes bring Ned the wayfarer closer to age and death. His final initiation brings self-knowledge

too late. The autumn of life, as it were, has brought no emancipation, no release, no renewal, only what we might identify as bitter isolation.

Cheever's commentary through his imaginative merger of fantasy and reality in this myth, I think, is clear enough. Ned as a typical modern man has indulged himself and his whims; he has immersed himself in the pleasures of drink and sex to the degree that he is not aware of what is happening to him. Immaturity and irresponsibility prevent him from seeing what he has done with his life. Repeatedly, he has fallen back upon the illusion that he is controlling his life and its direction. He has rationalized and accepted any bypaths of pleasure. He has the gift for the concealment of *pain*; it cannot happen to him. At times, he finally glimpses the absurdity of continuing the direction he has chosen, but at such points he "creates" his own "reality," Because he refuses to face the actualities of time's passage, his illusion of his own youthfulness makes him appear increasingly pathetic and pitiful at the end of the journey. His compulsion to go on and his blindness have continued even after the pleasures have been lost. Ned's final peering through the windows of his house is symbolic of his "seeing" the emptiness within himself.

"The Swimmer," then, is a myth of time and man as it is also a modern myth of metamorphosis. Coincidentally, Cheever as story teller recalls the figure of the philosopher in Ovid's masterpiece, one who has the faculty of seeing "with clarity of mind and heart," of telling the story of "men who seem born to die and chilled by death." Two lines from the fifteenth book of The Metamorphoses adequately sum up the author's story, for Cheever has imaginatively created a significant myth about

... sky, wind, earth and time forever changing Time like a river in its ceaseless motion.

Source: Cortland P. Auser, "John Cheever's Myth of Man and Time- 'The Swimmer'," in *CEA Critic*, Vol. XXIX, No. 6, March, 1967, p. 18-9.

Adaptations

A film version of "The Swimmer" was released in 1968 by Columbia Pictures. It was directed by Frank Perry (and Sydney Pollack, uncredited), adapted by Eleanor Perry, and starred Burt Lancaster.

Topics for Further Study

Research the idea of the mythic hero. How does Neddy Merrill resemble the mythic hero? In what ways does he not represent a hero?

Discuss the social and political climate of America in the 1960s. Compare this to the picture of American life presented in "The Swimmer."

Research Sigmund Freud's theories concerning dream interpretation. Based on your findings, examine the importance of various events and items that appear in "The Swimmer."

Analyze the importance of water imagery in "The Swimmer" and other works of literature, for example, John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath and Saul Bellow's Seize the Day. What different kinds of things does water represent in these works?

Compare and Contrast

1960s: Affluent Americans have more money than ever before. The gross national product, the value of goods produced by the national workforce, increases almost 36 percent during the first half of the decade. Salaries increase about 20 percent during this same period.

Today: The United States uses about one-third of the world's raw materials consumed each year. This is five times the average consumption for l/15th of the earth's population.

1960s: Many cities continue to experience a rise in suburban development which began in the 1950s. Many middle-class whites flee from cities to the suburbs, resulting in an increasing disparity between the quality of life in the city versus the surrounding area.

Today: The federal government institutes a number of programs designed to rejuvenate America's cities, among which is the designation of "empowerment zones." The program is designed to spark growth in these areas by offering incentives to businesses located within the zone.

1960: Some 400,000 marriages are dissolved by the courts.

Today: In 1994, 1.2 million marriages were dissolved by the courts. Experts estimate that 50 percent of all marriages will end in divorce.

What Do I Read Next?

John Updike's "Rabbit" series—*Rabbit, Run* (1960), *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990)—offers commentary on American society in the last part of the twentieth century, by focusing on the life of suburban, upper-class protagonist, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom.

In Washington Irving's "*Rip Van Winkle*" (1819), the title character falls asleep and awakens years later to discover that much has changed during his "nap." Rip's entire experience, like Neddy Merrill's, has been interpreted as a dream.

Cheever's *The Brigadier and the Golf Widow* (1964) examines the themes of American affluence and suburbia.

J. D. Salinger's classic, *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), is the story of one young man's coming of age and search for truth in a world full of "phonies.

Further Study

Cheever, John. The Journals of John Cheever, Alfred A. Knopf, 1991.

Contains journal excerpts covering a period from the late 1940s until 1982 in which Cheever comments on his homosexuality, his alcoholism, and his processes of composition.

Riley, Kathryn. "John Cheever and the Limitations of Fantasy," in *CEA Critic*, Vol. 45, nos 3-4, March-May, 1983, pp. 21-26.

Riley provides a brief thematic overview of "The Swimmer" and other stones by Cheever.

Slabey, Robert M. "John Cheever: The 'Swimming' of America," in Critical Essays on John Cheever, edited by R. G. Collins, G. K. Hall, 1982.

A close reading of the story, concentrating on mythological parallels and sources for Cheever's character names.

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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.

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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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