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# The Pain of Dissociation in John Cheever's *The Swimmer*

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John Cheever is one of the most important novelist and short story writer, was born in 1912, Quincy. Most of his story deals with suburb life in which constant balancing act between hope, ambivalence and anxiety. This paper attempts to examine the short story *THE SWIMMER*, Cheever's ever popular short story. This story has many realistic details included, also contains an element of fantasy and reality and it chronicles a middle-aged man's gradual acceptance of the truth that he has avoided facing—that his life is in ruins.

Neddy Merill is protagonist and the story is eventually revealed as reflecting the disordered mind of Ned Merrill. He is youthful, strong, and athletic; by the end, he is a weak and broken man, unable to understand the wreckage of his life. Proud of his wife and his four beautiful daughters, Merrill at first seems the picture of health and contentment and begins with a suburban parody of the communal Eucharist. The opening of "The Swimmer" contains the following passage describing the atmospheric conditions on the Sunday that Ned Merrill undertakes his quasi-epic swim through the succession of swimming pools he names the "Lucinda River":

> "It was a fine day. In the west there was a massive stand of cumulus cloud so like a city seen from a distance--from the bow of an approaching ship--that it might have had a name. Lisbon. Hackensack" (603)

Considering that there are well over two dozen critical analyses explicating nearly every detail of this richly allusive story. So Cheever, very possibly, was mindful of how his story's central metaphor reiterates a dramatic image pivotally located at the outset of the Inferno. The lost poet, trying to escape from the dark woods of sin, struggles to free himself from the worldly realm of evil to which he must ultimately return, and at a deeper level.

At the outset of his spiritual allegory, Cheever represents a world entirely given over to surfeit: the leader of the Audubon group ..." (603) are all afflicted with excess, symbolized by drinking too much. Since Judeo-Christian man by definition is a sinner, his only recourse is to shed his infirmities as he moves forth on the way to salvation, the ars moriendi revivified in homiletic literature since Everyman. But Merrill's soul trek will be far less sobering. Accordingly, and with the prospect of enjoying his day, Merrill, as he sets about planning his swim "home" by means of the "river" formed by a succession of neighbourhood pool.

Merrill feels like an explorer. He dives into the Westerhazys' pool, swims across, and gets out on the other side. He thinks about all the pools that lie ahead and the friends that await him. He walks to the Grahams' pool, swims across, then has a drink. He next swims across the Hammers' pool, then several others. At the Bunkers' pool, a party is going on. Enid Bunker greets him, telling him that she's happy he could come to the party after all. He has a drink, then moves on. The Levys aren't home, but Merrill swims across their pool anyway and helps himself to a drink, feeling very contented. A storm begins, and Merrill waits it out in the Levys' gazebo. After the storm, he notices that red and yellow leaves are scattered all over the lawn.

Cheever describes here an envy that Neddy Merrill disguises as wistfulness: "Ned felt a passing affection for the scene, a disengaging tenderness for the gathering, as if it was something he might touch" (605). But as Neddy Merrill becomes recognized by all, and the gathering, although we don't know exactly why as yet, overzealously threatens to "surround" him, he rushes back into his river, anxious to resume "his voyage" (605). Curiously, Cheever has made Neddy - along with his reader - distant observers of the very action that subsumes him and afflicted suburbanites must remain in the dark - Neddy to his suffering, they to their own afflictions.

We might, then, wonder where in this world stands Cheever's reader, who knows virtually nothing of the main character, who himself knows little among people who speak negligibly, if at all, of him and themselves. As for Neddy's neighbors, saturated in various solutions of pride and envy, Cheever's vapid bourgeoisie share little more than their over-ready self-indulgence, torpid will, and self-preening respectability. Neddy Merrill in this dismal state, despite his physical vitality, can remain just as "pleased" (606) drinking and swimming in the pool at the vacated Levy premises as he had been before at pools busy with such people, whose fellowship he, like the others, doesn't truly need but whose drinks he customarily relishes. The storm that finally arrives and confines Merrill to the Levys' gazebo brings with it a hint of autumn and death, as "red and yellow leaves" become scattered on the lawn.

Then Merrill heads toward the Welchers' pool. On his way, he finds that the Lindleys' horse-riding area is overgrown, and he can't remember whether he heard that the Lindleys were going away for the summer. At the Welchers' house, he finds that the pool is empty, which Neddy Merrill thinks is strange. There is a for-sale sign in front of their hous, he wonders whether his memory is failing him or he has just repressed unpleasant information.

This throws fight upon the condition of Merrill, whose amnesia is neither psychological nor provisional, but, in the context of Cheever's Dantesque tale, profoundly spiritual and enduring. Merrill's "pilgrimage," although ostensibly directed towards "home," is actually oriented vaguely toward the "west," where, as he reports, "there was a massive stand of cumulus clouds so like a city seen from a distance" (603).

Merrill's ignorance renders him oblivious to the depths of his soul's degradation as much as it helps to explain Cheever's unusual narrative technique, which obscures as much as it reveals. Neither Neddy nor his neighbors are even faintly aware of their constrictions.

Cheever, fully privileged and insightfully shows us how Neddy Merrill's neighbours, in seeming to know more about his condition, in fact unaware of the dire limits of their mortality - and morality. They share with Neddy their impoverished self-knowledge and deprived awareness of what lies about them.

Relatedly, Neddy's deception has been against his wife and against his mistress, from whom, we learn, he has obtained money injuriously. Cheever provides dialogue that is half stichomythia:

"What do you want?" she said.

"I'm swimming across the country."

"Good Christ. Will you ever grow up?"

"What's the matter?"

"If you've come here for money," she said, "I won't give you another cent."

"You could give me a drink."

"I could but I won't. I'm not alone."

"Well, I'm on my way." (611)

The curt give and take here, by its diminished form, suggests all in the way of human connectedness, feebly wrought and worded as it may be, that Neddy can summon with another soul. We now know how truly alone Neddy, so completely from himself, has become.

Finally As Neddy swims home, he loses his strength, cold and faint, finds his wife and his daughters gone, "the place empty" - his world lost. Neither alive nor dead. Neddy Merrill

leaves us in his suburban void, which Cheever portrays as subsuming everyman thrashing about in the oblivion of his nowadays.

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