

Suburban Escapism in "The Swimmer"

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"The Swimmer" by John Cheever is an allegorical story that effectively uses an objective third-person perspective to encourage active interpretation from the audience. Through the insightful use of setting, imagery, and the incorporation of symbolic elements, the story's meaning is drastically changed; on the surface, "The Swimmer" is about a man whose quest to swim across every pool in his neighborhood becomes increasingly sinister as he and the world around him changes. Deeper analysis, however, reveals that Neddy is an amoral and alcoholic hedonist whose major flaw is his inability to accept the aging process, much to his own detriment.

The first paragraph of "The Swimmer" introduces the overarching problem of alcoholism present in Neddy's life, as well as in the lives of his suburbia's other inhabitants. "It was one of those midsummer Sundays when everyone sits around saying, 'I drank too much last night.' ... 'We all *drank* too much,' said Lucinda Merrill" (p. 77). The suburbians of this story, including Neddy, supposedly drink as an innocent form of pleasure and past-time, but as their overdrinking indicates, they are really engaging in the pleasure of drinking excessively to escape the underlying toxicity of their inauthentic lifestyles. This implicit toxicity is revealed as the story progresses and is symbolized by the relative success of Neddy's swims. The pools in the neighborhood represent contentment with suburban life--the warmer and fuller a pool is, the owner of the pool is implied to be more content or at least involved in suburban life. As the pools become progressively colder as Neddy swims through them, the stability of Neddy's life is shown to be crumbling. It isn't long before he reaches the Welchers' pool, which is empty, causing one of the many existential crises Neddy experiences throughout the story. He is mystified by the fact the Welchers' are gone; "It was common enough to away for the summer but no one ever drained his pool" (p. 81). The implication in this line is that although it is common for people to take a break from suburban life, few people give up on it entirely. They survive it through active escapism in the form of alcoholism or other activities like swimming, or playing tennis (p. 82). The Welchers', however, could no longer tolerate the environmental toxicity that Neddy himself unwittingly helped create--he soon recalls that he and his wife had "regretted an invitation to dine with them" (p. 81) before the sudden departure, one of several social rejections that appear to have driven the Welchers' away, leaving the pool--and therefore, their contentment with suburban life--drained.

Besides serving as a symbol for suburban life, bodies of water in this story represent alcoholism. Water and alcohol are both liquids, and in the context of this story, combine in ways that provide fluid imagery, contributing to the reader's interpretation. Alcoholism is a form of escapism that is directly tied to the characters' suburban surroundings in the form of their pools. The setting plays another important role in providing meaning to the story through Cheever's use of pathetic fallacy: "It was a fine day," this paragraph on page 77 reads, implying that everything is calm, only to continue, "In the west there was a massive stand of cumulus clouds so like a city seen from a distance--from the bow of an approaching ship--that it might have had a name. Lisbon. Hackensack. The sun was hot." The sailing imagery in this line is meant to connect the symbolic significance of the weather to the symbolic significance of the pools, as both have to do with water. This type of imagery is something that persists throughout the story, as when Neddy leaves the party and hears "the watery sound of voices fade" (p. 80). The pathetic fallacy is just

as present in the story, with reminders of the distant yet approaching storm dispersed throughout. Every symbolic swim Neddy takes brings the storm closer and closer.

Whenever he is swimming, Neddy is either under the influence of alcohol or desiring its influence. "It was his fourth or fifth drink and he had swum nearly half the length of the Lucinda River. He felt tired, clean, and pleased at that moment to be alone; pleased with everything" (p. 80). Neddy's priorities are clearly his own pleasure--the fact that he is "pleased at the moment to be alone" and drunk, instead of sober and in the company of his family, is a defining aspect of his characterization. Despite his selfishness, it is not initially clear where the main source of pleasure is derived from, for besides being inebriated, he also takes immense pleasure in pure sensory experiences like swimming. Take this line, for instance: "He 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" (p. 77). He would even prefer to swim naked to get the full sensation of water across his body (p. 78). The experiences he has, including the awareness of aesthetic notions, are translated in his mind to represent some form of a physical sensation; "Ned felt a passing affection for the scene, a tenderness for the gathering, as if it was something he might touch" (p. 79). His inability to view anything as inherently good without ascribing some aspect of sensory experience to it caused reparations between him and his wife. The relationship was lacking in emotional sensitivity, and she is gone at the end of the story, leaving a vacant home, symbolically representing both her choice to leave him and the emptiness of his life (p. 88). Sensory experiences are therefore shown to be the focus of Neddy's life experience, rather than virtues, stability, and relationships, revealing the depth of his hedonism.

However, Neddy does not solely take pleasure from sensory experiences experiences, like being drunk or swimming. His hedonism is in constant conflict with his aging, for as he ages, his sensory experiences become debilitated, denying him the degree of physical appreciation he is so enraptured by. The reader's introduction to Neddy solidifies the nature of his vivacious, hands-on approach to life: "Neddy Merrill sat by the green water, one hand in it, one around a glass of gin. ... and while he was far from young he had slid down his banister that morning and given the bronze backside of Aphrodite on the table a smak, as he jogged toward the smell of coffee in his dining room" (p. 77). Neddy's actions are almost childish--sliding down a banister and spanking a statue are not ways most respectful people Neddy's age act, but there it is. Neddy's main desire is to feel young, and in various ways, his vices allow him to feel young, or at least allow him to forget he is aging. His vices--whether they be drinking, swimming through other people's pools, or gambling--provide sensory experiences that are meant to combat his internal mid-life crisis, and by combatting this internal conflict, he is also able to receive pleasure.

By analyzing Cheever's use of setting, imagery, and symbolic elements in "The Swimmer", a new appreciation is gained for the character of Neddy and his struggle in life. Readers don't have to like Neddy, but they should at least be able to understand the significance of his conflict. In a world where nothing is as it seems and the only thing that is certain is the progress of time, one can't be blamed for trying to gain a little more control, even when the struggle for that control is inauthentic.

Works Cited

Cheever, John. ""The Swimmer""." *The Seagull Reader*, 3rd ed., Edited by Joseph Kelly, W.W.

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