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Suburban grotesque: The vision of John Cheever

Hartman, Lorie S., Ph.D.

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U·M·I
300 N. Zeeb Rd.
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

Suburban Grotesque: The Vision of John Cheever

by

Lorie Hartman

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

Suburban Grotesque: The Vision of John Cheever

by

Lorie Hartman

Adviser: Professor Irving Howe

This dissertation is a study of the fiction of John Cheever who is primarily known for the short stories he wrote and published in The New Yorker magazine from the years 1935 through 1975.

It is the purpose of this dissertation to trace the recurring themes that dominate Cheever's fictions and to reveal Cheever as a writer haunted by dark images of the grotesque. In his best work, Cheever was able to illumine the disorder and alienation at the heart of contemporary American life, especially that life which is carried on in the suburbs.

But the grotesque is not limited to Cheever's fictional suburbs. Cheever identified the generating source of his work as the fear of confinement, and he used geographical places to symbolize that fear: the small, decaying New England town of St. Botolphs, the suburbs such as Shady Hill and Bullet Park, and finally the Falconer Federal Penitentiary.

Cheever's method was to beguile the reader through an easy-going, casual narrative style of apparent realism which allowed the grotesque and the supernatural in his fiction to seem believable and even inevitable. He was a master at blending the laughable and comic with images of terror or despair.

Because he dreaded the incursions of technology into the seeming beauty of pastoral settings, he is very much in the tradition of what the critic Richard Chase calls "American Romance." In this tradition, the writer is allowed a greater freedom from verisimilitude and continuity, since his purpose is to illumine the inner reality of characters who find themselves in crisis.

Although Cheever's style became more radical and less realistic in his later years, the presence of the grotesque was there from the beginning. As a result, his best fiction is far more daring and experimental than has generally been realized.

For my mother

I would like to thank Professor Irving Howe for all his kindness and encouragement during the past years. His criticism and suggestions for revision have been immensely helpful.

I would also like to gratefully acknowledge the time and support which Professor William Kelly and Professor David Gordon gave so generously to this project.

In addition, I would like to thank my husband for his certainty that by thinking through the fiction of John Cheever, I would also see some of the realities of my own life.

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Preface

"It all done been fix, en I ain't seen nobody yit what can onfix it...."

Chandler Harris, Uncle Remus Tales

During the months I have been writing this study of John Cheever's fiction, many people have asked me why I chose this particular writer. There has been a note of doubt in their inquiries, a look of scepticism as if to convey the suggestion that Cheever was essentially a mainstream author who published his work in The New Yorker and tried hard not to offend established values. To an extent, these criticisms of Cheever are justified, and there have been moments in which his fictional vision has seemed to me a dishonest attempt to evade the full implications of what he saw and what he knew.

But, in his best moments, Cheever reveals the loss and absurdity at the heart of contemporary American life, particularly that life which is carried on now in American suburbs.

It is this suburban fiction that first drew me to Cheever, for many of the scenes set in Shady Hill or Proxmire

Manor are strangely close to the incidents, people, and landscape I recall from my childhood in one of Chicago's upper middle class suburbs on the North Shore.

Like Shady Hill, Highland Park, Illinois is a suburb of curving tree-lined streets, spacious houses, green and leafy lawns, country clubs, and quietly elegant supermarkets that cater to the most exotic culinary fantasies.

Yet, when I was growing up in Highland Park, the town seemed still to retain a steadying if subtle suggestion of its origin as a prairie place. We lived in the woods. Occasionally, we saw deer. I was badly frightened when rattlesnakes were discovered in our woods and my parents bought serum which was kept in the freezer in case one of us should get bitten.

Even then, however, the town was oddly two-leveled. There were the prairie people who had come from towns in southern Illinois such as Centralia or DuQuoin. They ran small farms, worked as postmen or carpenters and seemed still to retain a centering memory of genuine small town life.

My parents' friends were different. The men worked in the city. The women had maids and nurses for their children. Their days were spent at the club in summer. In winter, they worked for charity drives, chauffered their children to and from the usual round of private lessons and doctors appointments, and then picked up their husbands each evening

at the local train station. It was all predictable, routine, and, outwardly safe.

Yet, beneath the ordered rhythm of our life in the suburbs, strange and terrible events would erupt unpredictably as if to show us that the appearance of pastoral calm was no more than an illusion. When I was ten or so, one of my father's friends--a golf partner and a frequent visitor at our house--hanged himself from the shower rail in his bathroom. The body was discovered by his son who some years later disappeared into the gay community of Chicago.

Another couple who were my parents' closest friends seemed frightening to me. They were so ill-matched. The husband was from one of Chicago's most illustrious Jewish families. He was wealthy and jocund, a sprightly little gnome with pink cheeks. He was the head of the men's clothing department at Marshall Fields, and my father respected him as an able businessman. The wife was of Irish Catholic descent and had come from Tennessee. How they found each other I never learned. But, when the wife got drunk, she would lapse into a hillbilly bawdiness that infuriated and embarrassed her husband. My parents said that he would threaten her with divorce after such occasions. They were both very small and always impeccably attired. There was something prissy and far too perfect about their appearance, and they seemed to attract tragedy. Their daughter was killed in a car accident in the

city; their son went up to a cabin they owned in Wisconsin and shot his head off; an uncle had also committed suicide by jumping from one of Chicago's office towers, and the wife's sister was an alcoholic who, even in her fifties, would lapse into her Tennessee twang and shout obscenities. Once, she insisted that I come with her into the women's locker room of the country club so that she could tell me that although she was dying of leukemia, she didn't want her sister to know.

The illness she suffered from was alcoholism, not cancer, but despite the embarrassment she caused, her family never tried to put her away in an institution or move her to a city neighborhood where her infelicities of speech would go unnoticed. There was a certain staunch loyalty in this family that gave their misfortunes a nearly tragic dignity.

This emphasis upon loyalty was one of the unspoken realities of our suburban life. When a member of the country club was indicted in some sort of complex embezzling scheme, no one turned on him. On the contrary, the more influential members used their connections to keep the man out of prison. They also chipped in to pay his dues at the country club. Eventually, however, the man slipped out of sight, moved or disappeared, I never really knew which.

There was the typical premium put on what John Cheever would call "sumptuary law." Most men wore Lacoste shirts and expensively tailored trousers when they played golf and

seersucker suits in summer when they boarded the 8:10 for the city. Yet, there was actually no real insistence upon conformity, and one of the men chose to appear on the first tee each summer weekend in knickers, long socks, and a tweed cap with a visor. There were rumors about him: that he liked to play cards with the men in the locker room for high stakes, that he had once earned his living by running the gambling tables in Las Vegas, and that he had married his middle-aged wife for her money. He was tall and very handsome and cultivated an English accent to match his cosmopolitan golfing attire. He loved music, and liked to say that he had hoped to be a singer. I played the piano accompaniment once while he sang a Schumann song about how his love for a maiden enabled him to transcend earthly concerns and become his better self. Although his voice was cracked, he sang with genuine feeling, and I somehow began to think of him as The Riverboat Gambler. I liked to believe that when he sang the words, "You, my soul, you my heart, you my joy, my better part," he was thinking of me rather than his orange-haired wife.

So I grew up in Cheever country. I knew it before I read the fiction, and when I found the story called "The Sorrows of Gin," I understood the ten-year old Amy Lawton who first dumps out the liquor and then fills her father's gin bottle with water. Amy has been left with an indifferent baby sitter who tells her that drink is the devil's instrument. Of course,

Amy's action only results in the baby sitter's being accused of having drunk the gin herself. So, in fear, Amy packs her clothes and secretly goes to the local train station. It is only the intervention of the station agent that prevents Amy from escaping into the city. When Amy's father comes to retrieve her, he has no idea why she has chosen to do such a foolish thing. For a moment, the sight of her forlorn figure sitting on the bench with "the rich names on her paper suitcase" touches him. He shivers and feels the same sensation "as when driving home late and alone, a shower of leaves on the wind crossed the beam of his headlights, liberating him for a second at the most from the literal symbols of his life--the buttonless shirts, the vouchers and bank statements, the order blanks, and the empty glasses" ("The Sorrows of Gin" CS 209).[1]

I was drawn to Cheever also because he seemed so much like my father who was a first rate newspaper reporter before he traded journalism for the higher fees of public relations. Had my father written fiction, it would have been much like Cheever's. Each had grown up with an ancestry that tormented him: Cheever with the Puritan ideal of the successful man of affairs, upright, and understated; my father with the wish to shed his Jewishness, to be as rugged, stoical, and heroic as

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[1] The abbreviation of "CS" refers to The Collected Stories of John Cheever. New York: Knopf, 1978.

a Hemingway hero.

Cheever's suburbs beckoned me with the lure of discovering what kind of world I had grown up in, why it was so sad for so many of us even though it seemed on the surface to possess a narcotic and pastoral beauty. There was the loveliness of the landscape: gardens in the summer and icicles hanging off the huge, bare trees all winter. At dusk in the warm months, the crickets would chirp incessantly and the fireflies sparkled in the darkening fields.

And yet, something was terribly wrong. Perhaps the trouble slipped in with the suburban myth of the good life; we were told so often that we lived in a land of milk and honey that we dared not acknowledge sorrow. Unconcealed misery was the one unpardonable sin. It was mandatory to be happy all the time, and under this pressure our lives seemed to take strange turnings as if some invisible force were determined to make us see the folly of such unreal expectations.

There was always a high premium put on games in the suburbs, and although Cheever himself loved games, he sensed the ominous way in which games can suddenly turn serious. Cash Bentley's determination to preserve his youth by leaping over living room furniture becomes deadly when it is no longer played for fun. Cheever would have understood what the Greek poet Bion meant when he tried to define the essential nature of a short tale by saying, "The boys throw stones at the frogs in sport, but the frogs die not in sport but in

earnest." It is Cheever's pained awareness that the inhabitants of his fiction are both the boys and the frogs that gives his writing its poignancy and power.

Chapter One

In Search of John Cheever

The world John Cheever creates is a world in which landscape looms large. Environment is a gravitational pull that holds a character in place. Cheever's characters rarely escape the influence of their environment, and when they do, it is often as a descent, a steep fall from one level of the social hierarchy to the next.

The New York City of the early stories is romantic, but its allure is ephemeral and often fatal. It is a New York in which promises are made but rarely kept, in which people's lives go wrong, become embittered by loneliness or disappointed ambition. And always, it is the city itself--its lights and sounds, its restaurants and avenues --that finally closes around the characters who live there, imprisoning them in the grid of their own helpless yearnings.

This awareness of the way in which a region can imprint itself on the inner lives of its inhabitants so that they become living embodiments of the region's stereotypical eccentricities and attitudes becomes the controlling vision not only in the early New York stories, but also in the Wapshot novels. For Cheever, the sorrow of New England is in the tacky beach cottages and amusement parks that now disfigure its landscape, and in the rigidity of its eccentric

inhabitants that renders them unable to adapt to a world of change. Although there is pathos in the Wapshots' adherence to outmoded ceremonies of innocence, there is grandeur as well. For, like other American writers such as Henry James and T.S. Eliot, Cheever dreaded the disorder and ugliness that would accompany America's seeming willingness to throw over the anchoring tradition of a pastoral way of life.

It is Cheever's yearning for beauty of landscape and an ordered, predictable rhythm of existence that draws him to the suburbs he creates in his stories. He writes of the suburb both as a place and as a state of mind. As it emerges in Cheever's writing, the suburb becomes the last incarnation of America's pastoral dream, and a final haven against the encroaching ugliness of superhighways with their franchise strips, drive-in movies, miniature golf ranges, and shopping malls.In this way, Cheever's suburban fiction takes its place in the American literary tradition that has always viewed cities as places of corruption. Yet, like other American utopian dreams, the suburb could not fulfill its promise of a new life, and, almost against his conscious will, Cheever began to write of it as a place of loneliness in which solitary characters live out their lives in a green and sunlit environment of fraudulence.

Darkening in Cheever's imagination, the suburbs change gradually from the protective if trivializing boundaries of

Shady Hill to the more surreal environments of Proxmire Manor, B-, and Bullet Park. Nor is it as radical a change as it might seem to move from Bullet Park with its unpredictable explosions of violence to the manifestly brutal,irrational world of Cheever's last major novel set in the Falconer Federal Penitentiary.

Falconer is the last place not only for the convicts it imprisons, but also for Cheever's fiction; it makes real the underlying dread in all of Cheever's work that eventually any location will entrap an individual in its own kind of spiritual suffocation.

Cheever was aware that the fear of confinement had become central to his vision. In an interview, he remarked that all of his work dealt with confinement in one shape or another, and that he had used "three metaphors for confinement in [his] books: the small New England Village, the world of affluent exurbia, and now prison"(Interview with John Firth, 1977).

In this analysis of his own work, Cheever is perceptive but perhaps too limiting, for the dread of confinement which is so urgent in his writing transcends physical location. It is the dread that any environment we create eventually becomes an enclosed grid which takes on a strange power of its own to contain and control the individual.

The English critic Tony Tanner writes of this fear of environment as a concept which frequently resurfaces in the

American imagination:

> There is an abiding dream in American literature that an unpatterned, unconditioned life is possible, in which your movements and stillnesses, choices and repudiations are all your own; and there is an abiding American dread that someone else is patterning your life....The problematical and ambiguous relationship of the self to patterns of all kinds--social, psychological, linguistic--is an obsession among recent American writers (City of Words 15).

As a reaction to their dread of imprisonment, characters in American fiction are apt to take the radical action of a Wakefield who, for no apparent reason, severs himself suddenly from his former life. American literature is a fiction of characters who light out for the territory, exile themselves in Europe, or stay on the road. The strange thing about Cheever's characters--especially the suburban ones--is that they have lost any real power to grapple with their environment. They might yearn to evade a socially imposed identity, but ultimately they allow themselves to be reduced to the world's standards. Herman Melville knew that men should learn the lesson of the whale and " live in this world without being of it." Cheever's characters have lost this awareness, if they ever had it, and therefore they live in a

world of limited possibility.

It is this extreme inability to imagine alternatives for their lives that causes the inhabitants of Cheever's fiction such desperation. Kierkegaard wrote that "if a human existence is brought to the point where it lacks possibility, then it is in despair....possibility is the only salvation" (Sickness unto Death 37-38). In their acceptance of the world as is, Cheever's characters deny their own inner freedom; it is this spiritual confinement that causes them to respond to their dilemmas with the mechanical, repetitive, and ultimately ineffective behavior that turns them into grotesques.

The characters Cheever imagines are incapable of sustained introspection. If they read, they pull a random book from a shelf by chance and use it as an anodyne to dull anxiety. Cheever's characters dine out with friends, tend their gardens, earn money, and go to endless parties where they drink and dance. But they do not attempt to understand the meaning or purpose of their lives. Without capacity for genuine insight, they lose individual outline and definition. They seem to merge into a collective of shadowy figures who are generally well-to-do but uneasy; who are almost inevitably troubled in their marriages, and have not so much turned aggressively against intellectual rigor as they have passively relinquished the hope of attaining wisdom. As such, they become suburbanites of the soul, self-exiled from the more

intense commitments that are the defining outlines of individual identity.

Especially in Cheever's late fiction, the individual character is always in danger of melt-down, forever concerned with the real threat that it will be transformed into the pattern of another person's personality. Without a sustaining depth and richness of identity, Cheever's characters are left at risk of an isolation which can never be assuaged, no matter how continuously the social round is pursued. For, in the shallow fragility of their spirit, they can find sustenance neither from each other nor from a fulfilling enounter with self.

It is this lack of inner complexity coupled with their irredeemable loneliness that makes Cheever's characters seem more effective in short stories than in novels. They explode from the crises of their lives in brief and often violent acts rather than muse on the values and assumptions that have made them desperate.

They are at the very farthest remove from the characters Henry James creates, characters such as Isabel Archer or Lambert Strether who attempt constantly to expand their understanding, to adapt to new visions and possibilities never before imagined. Without the capacity for complexity of relationship either to the inner world of self or to the outer world of an intricately perceived social setting, the

novel for density of social texture and psychological insight.

Unable to grasp the deeper meaning of their difficulties, Cheever's characters rely on strange, solipsistic strategems to relieve their pain: they jump over furniture, swim through a network of suburban pools, or bake Lady Baltimore cakes secretly in their kitchens at midnight. In relation to their interior blankness, the exterior world seems a force capable of reducing individual characters to docility. Should an individual such as Gee-Gee in "The Scarlet Moving Van" be unable to conform, the environment expels him and he disappears.

The annihilating power which environment wields in Cheever's fiction to paralyze individuals and blow them away creates a sense that the characters have been victimized, made ephemeral and impermanent by the greater force of the surrounding society. With very little to hold on to, Cheever's characters tend to lose their grip, to seek hopelessly for the human connection that the surrounding society continually promises and denies. Solitary and bewildered, they often conform to D.H. Lawrence's definition of the essential American soul as "hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer"(Studies in Classic American Literature 68).

As a release from loneliness, alcohol becomes a magic potion of transformation in Cheever's fiction, and the mixing of martinis is the one ritual which is enacted with genuine

conviction. Only in Hemingway's novels is there an equal amount of attention lavished on drinking. Yet, there is a telling difference in the way the two authors portray their characters' dependence on liquor. Hemingway's characters still frequently take pleasure in the icy coldness of their wine, the perfect complement of beer to a meal eaten in the wilderness. In Cheever's stories, there is almost no sensuous delight remaining, and the men and women seem to drink mindlessly in restless pursuit of escape.

"I drank too much," moans one of the characters gathered around the suburban pool in "The Swimmer." "We all drank too much," the others agree. Like moths fluttering towards light, the inhabitants of Cheever's fiction are drawn to a virtually endless chain of parties that keep them constantly in motion. The restlessness that impels them seems only to intensify their hunger for an elusive sense of permanence and belonging. It is this underlying awareness of their own ephemerality that causes Cheever's characters to seek out the colonial architecture and early American furniture that signify tradition and longevity.

The primal symbol of dread in Cheever's world is the scarlet moving van that rolls soundlessly through the suburban dusk bringing strangers who will become new neighbors and carrying off the possessions of those who must face the

necessity of constructing, once again, in still another locale, the illusion of a well established family history.

Cheever always said when he was asked why he chose to work so concentratedly in the short story form that short stories seemed appropriate to the late twentieth century, expressing the mobility of modern life, its loneliness and discontinuity. Essentially, Cheever would have agreed with Nietzche's certainty that "the only thing that can nowadays be well made, that can be a masterpiece is the small thing. Only in that is integrity still possible" (Stern, Nietzsche 21-22). He often defined fiction as "a superior form of dream that bursts toward illumination," and this fictional rhythm of quick explosion rather than steady, thorough investigation and exploration of social pattern also became a factor in Cheever's affinity for the short story form.

In The Lonely Voice, a study of the modern short story, Frank O'Connor writes that the short story only rarely portrays any sort of heroic figure. What it offers instead is a representative from some characteristic group within the general society that feels itself to be marginal and at particular risk of either spiritual or material dissolution. In these stories, "there is no character... with whom the reader can identify himself, unless it is that nameless, horrified figure who represents the author"(The Lonely Voice 17). O'Connor goes on to say that always in the short story

there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society, superimposed sometimes on symbolic figures whom they caricature and echo--Christ, Socrates, and Moses....As a result there is in the short story at its most characteristic...an intense awareness of human loneliness. (The Lonely Voice 19)

Even as Cheever seemed to be writing about the winners in American society, his characters are, in reality, the descendants of Charlie Chaplin's "Little Man": lonely, dwarfed and buffeted by their surroundings, and forever uneasy in a world that seems to echo with the sound of raucous parties and family fights.

To understand how John Cheever came to write this fiction, it is necessary to see how Cheever himself became the divided figure for whom the disguise of distinguished American lineage, wealth, and upscale gentility was both a destructive temptation and, simultaneously, a valorous deceit.

John Cheever liked to tell his children that the Cheever family was descended from Ezekiel Cheever who crossed the Atlantic in 1637, kept "the welfare of the Province much upon his spirit..., abominated Periwigs" and was eulogized by Cotton Mather. (Samuel Sewall qtd. in Donaldson 4). The real ancestor of Cheever's family was a prison keeper in Cambridge,

Massachusetts named Daniel Cheever. At some point, Cheever himself began to believe the tales he invented regarding his family ancestry, and this pattern of whimsical or wish fulfilling invention gradually forming itself as new doctrine became characteristic of Cheever's recollections. He seems to have spoken so often and so insistently of his father's position as owner of a shoe factory in Lynn, Mass. that he no longer accepted the reality that his father had been a travelling salesman for the factory who spent his days on the road moving from one New England retail shoe store to the next.

In any case, the financial crisis of 1929 hit Frederick Cheever hard, and he lost both job and savings. Although he tried to find work, he began to sink into a downward spiral of depression, alcoholism and self disgust. To keep the family afloat, Cheever's mother, Mary, began a gift shop in Quincy. The Mary Cheever Gift Shoppe did well right from the beginning. Delighted by her new independence and her ability to support the family, Cheever's mother seems to have spared her husband no opportunity to witness her success in contrast to his own resounding failure.

For the rest of his life, John Cheever loathed the sight and smell of the bric-a-brac that fills gift shops. Such clutter became emblematic to him of the way in which a woman can cheapen natural existence even as she pretends to be

providing a service to her family and her community. Recurring as a motif throughout Cheever's fiction is the woman who uses her husband's temporary economic embarrassment as the stepping stone to her own triumphant liberation. This idea surfaces in the bitterness with which Cheever describes Sarah Wapshot's glee as she contemplates transforming her husband's wrecked schooner into her vision of a waterside boutique:

> She saw the ship berthed at the garden wharf, her hull shining with fresh paint and her cabin full of light. She saw...a dozen or more cars parked in the cornfield...She saw a sign nailed to the elm by the path: VISIT THE S.S.TOPAZE, THE ONLY FLOATING GIFT SHOPPE IN NEW ENGLAND. In her mind she took the path down the garden and crossed the wharf to board the ship. Her cabin was all new paint (the life preservers were gone), and lamps burned on many small tables, illuminating a cargo of ash trays, cigarette lighters, playing-card cases, wire arrangements for holding flowers, vases, embroidery, handpainted drinking glasses and cigarette boxes that played "Tales from the Vienna Woods" when you opened them. (The Wapshot Chronicle 158)

It was impossible for Frederick and Mary Cheever not to turn in fury against one another. Although they remained

married in name, Cheever's father was often away from home. The rancor of his parents' marriage seemed to seep into John Cheever's soul, and there is almost no instance in his fiction of any sustaining love between a man and a woman. Instead, one reads again and again of embittered marriages in which the husband loses his job, begins to drink, leaves home, falls in love with a younger, prettier woman, or compensates for his wife's shrewishness by solacing himself with the imagined vision of a tender and understanding young girl. Those marriages that do endure--the Farquarsons of Shady Hill and the Trenchers in their New York city apartment--maintain themselves either at the cost of social imposture or mutual psychological aggression.

In Cheever's fiction, sexual love is typically explosive and uneasy. A woman's supressed rage will surface in the seemingly accidental murder of a husband, the vampire-like satisfaction of attending old lovers in their final illnesses, and the surreal ability to transform herself at will into a sexless hag.

As the catalyst of sexual agony, financial anxiety becomes, for Cheever's characters, the source of resentment and despair. Cheever writes about money with the same obsessive concern one finds in the fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald. He is intensely aware not only of the way in which economic disaster can bring about the collapse of a marriage,

but can also precipitate the steep descent through America's class system that is invariably a cause of personal despair. In one of his early uncollected stories, "North of Portland," written in 1940, a formerly well-to-do couple from an old and respected New England family has fallen on hard times. In order to survive, they must turn their historic house into a tourist accommodation, and this change in their fortunes makes them bitter and quarrelsome. In front of their grandson, the two fall into the hurtful and reductive recriminations that so often accompany unaccustomed scarcity. The grandmother scolds her husband for picking at his meals and then coming down to the pantry in the middle of the night to eat all the doughnuts she has made:

> "You pick at your food and then you get up in the night and come down here and eat a dozen doughnuts..."
>
> "Oh, all right," the old man cried. "Maybe I did eat a few doughnuts. What of it? Aren't they there to be eaten? Everything I do is wrong. Everything I've done for twenty years is wrong." ("North of Portland" 20)

The two try to smooth their quarrel over by diverting the grandson with an anecdote about some avaricious neighbors who had planned to build tourist cabins beside a man-made lake

only to wake up one morning to find that someone has drained away the water. Suddenly, the old man's laugh turns to a hacking cough, and near tears, he says faintly, "When I have seen by Time's fell hand defaced...."("North of Portland" 20)

The women in Cheever's fiction are typically survivors who might be required to share a husband's misfortune, but who will never again accord him respect or honor. Cheever always blamed his mother for her seeming indifference to his father's humiliation. Yet, Frederick Cheever never fully reciprocated his son's intense feeling. There seems to have been a settled conviction among all the family members that it was the older son, Fred, who had carried away all the father's affection. John Cheever felt himself to be an afterthought: conceived, as his mother liked to remind him, only because she had drunk two Manhattans one afternoon, and born only out of the stalwart resistance she put up to her husband's wish that the pregnancy be terminated.

For his older brother, Cheever felt a volatile mixture of love and hate, admiration and inevitable jealousy. As the two grew older, Cheever admitted that he had been troubled by the intensity of his love for Fred, that occasionally he feared even that this love was abnormal and dangerous. In an early story, "The Brothers," published in Cheever's first collection entitled <u>The Way Some People Live</u> (1943), Cheever writes of the closeness and cameraderie two brothers share,

and the younger brother's dawning realization that their intimacy has become too exclusive and intense:

> In the morning Tom woke up before his brother and left the room without waking him.... He was not greatly worried, though he was disturbed. He loved his brother, and this love was the strongest thing in his comprehension; but it was a love that held no jealousy and no fear and no increase....It was the first time it had occurred to Tom that their devotion to each other might be stronger than their love of any girl or even than their love of the world. ("The Brothers" 232)

When Tom, the younger brother, decides that he must go away in order to give them both the chance to begin more independent lives, Kenneth walks by himself through a meadow which is showing the first signs of the coming winter:

> He went down the drive, and at the gateposts he turned off towards the river, walking straight across the fields with the brush and grass whipping at his trousers.It was one of the first great nights of autumn, and the wind tasted of winter and of the season's end and moved in the trees with the noise

> of a conflagration. He made a mechanical clutching gesture with his hands as if something were slipping through them. He saw the dark hills, darker than the sky, and the grass and the trees and the river, as if he had never seen them before. Now he felt the pain that Tom had brought down on both of them without any indignation; they had tried to give their lives some meaning and order, and for love of the same world that had driven them together, they had had to separate. He walked through the fields clutching involuntarily at the air, as if something were slipping from his grasp, and swearing and looking around him like a stranger at the new, strange, vivid world. ("The Brothers" 236-237)

Again and again in John Cheever's fiction, the two brothers twist and twine in a mutual struggle of love and antagonism. Cheever himself was consciously aware that the theme had become almost obsessive. "The brothers story I've told fifty times, I guess," he often said. "Sometimes I think I am not telling it, but I am....I strike him in some, I hit him with sticks, rocks; he, in turn, also damages me...." (Donaldson 54).

When John Cheever did decide to move away from the Boston

apartment he shared with Fred, it was to New York and the beginning of his professional life as a writer. He never again would live in New England, but the beauty of the South Shore towns--Quincy and Hingham and Adams-- became, for him, the embodiment of a permanent, rooted, and pastoral way of life that was quickly disappearing.

Cheever's dread of modern technology emerges in the fiction he wrote through a recurrent horror that the airplanes and super highways, the trains and the vast bridges of twentieth century America imperil our sense that we are still in control. He would have agreed with Ralph Waldo Emerson's observation that "things are in the saddle and ride mankind." Cheever's dread of modernity co-exists uneasily with his dislike for any willed or self conscious effort to preserve the past. Those characters in his stories who place undue importance on a lowboy that has been in the family for several generations are usually characters who, for one reason or another, have been stunted in their ability to grow.

Although Cheever had a certain fondness for his Puritan ancestors--their quirkiness and the cachet of social acceptance this lineage lent the family--he was also

intensely aware of the burden this heritage of earnestness and morbid introspection could become. In their effort to break free from Puritan gloom, Cheever's characters will batter at anyone who seems to represent a force of repression that would smother simple delight in the natural world.

Of course, the conflict was most intensely carried on within Cheever himself. There were always two John Cheevers: the Dionysiac, party-going, fun loving Cheever who swam in the ocean, skated, played touch football, and was adept at lovely twists of self-mocking humor and the Cheever who drank far too much in the struggle to fend off recurrent attacks of anxiety and deep depression. His own dawning consciousness of the force of homosexual longing he would have somehow to deal with only added to the turbulence of his inner life. Coming from the gentility of his Protestant New England background in which men were expected to dress in tweeds and to preserve the facade of reasonably contented heterosexual monogamy, it would have been impossible for Cheever to surrender his tormenting secret. But, this attempt at concealment cost him a terrible effort, an effort which perhaps goes far to explain the force of fury in his fiction.

This force erupts in the nearly homicidal antagonism of brothers, the brutality of fathers to sons, the unbridled, almost gleeful cruelty of wives to their victim-husbands. Even the well ordered suburbs Cheever creates conceal a demonic

element, for without warning they seem to metamorphose into microcosms of damnation.

Almost against his intention, the suburban settings in Cheever's best work become transformed locations of irremediable loneliness that take on a nearly deterministic power of control over their inhabitants' lives. No one is able to leave. The commuter train speeds away in the morning, but invariably it brings its passengers home at night. The only escape is through a descent into financial or moral collapse. With bomb shelters buried under green and spacious back yards, and revolvers concealed within almost every home in Shady Hill, Cheever's suburbs become the terrain on which a dark, nearly surreal literature of spiritual blight unfolds.

Cheever always repudiated his resemblance to other American writers who forged their novels with a scrupulous realism that spared no effort of accuracy, even to the architecture of the country club, or the type of business attire men generally adopted. Denying that his fiction was a literature of manners in the style of J.P. Marquand or John O'Hara, Cheever liked to say, "The fact that I can count the olives in a dish just as quick as John O'Hara doesn't mean I'm O'Hara" (Donaldson, American Writers 189). More seriously, Alwyn Lee attempted to distinguish Cheever's art from the work of social realists in an article printed in Time magazine in 1964:

> The importance of his fiction comes from the urgency of his moral insights. This puts his work in a different order of art from that of John O'Hara, a man of greater technical skill with a harder eye for the surface detail of current U.S. life, but one who is limited to a bleak and ironical view of existence in which nothing can compensate for economic and social defeat or deprivation of status. He has surmounted the limitation which renders jejune the social chronicles of John Marquand; Cheever can place his people as unerringly as Marquand in the social pecking order, but they are seen finally as naked spirits, not ladies and gentlemen at all. (68)

It is ironic that the suburban setting elicited some of Cheever's most interesting fiction, for in the same way that the slave-holding South became a region instantly associated with a debased ethical structure, the American suburb was--and to a large extent still is--the despised region of contemporary culture.

Yet, unlike the South, the affluent suburbs had no shared history, no mythic folklore of heroism in defeat, and no tradition of intellectual endeavor. The suburbs were places created out of reaction: reaction to industrialization and

urban blight, to epidemics, to the influx of foreigners in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and to the seeming downfall of European culture after World War II which suggested the inevitable corruption of city life.

As if to reflect a mode of existence in which material well being is accepted as the defining condition of happiness, the post-war stories and novels set in American suburbs by authors such as O'Hara and Marquand have concentrated massive forces of literary realism on subjects of limited interest. This association of the suburban locale with themes considered trivial if not bourgeois has led critics to group Cheever's work with theirs as predominantly a fiction of dispirited acceptance.

It is not so much Cheever's subject, but rather his relation to that subject which is, occasionally, cause for concern. Throughout his career, Cheever reitterated his conviction that the suburban setting itself never radically altered his characters' actions or attitudes. "I am not out to be a social critic...nor a defender of suburbia," he often protested. "It goes without saying that the people in my stories and the things that happen to them could take place anywhere" (interview with Rollene Waterman, Saturday Review).

Although he could not consistently preserve this sort of bland, sociological neutrality, the fact that it was Cheever's stated intention to keep his fiction free of heavy social criticism certainly affects the characteristic texture and

design of a Cheever story. Alfred Kazin has noted that Cheever's characters never engage in a genuine battle with their environment (Kazin, O'Hara, Cheever, and Updike" in Essays 121). Instead, to avoid confrontation with the social forces in league against them, characters will typically make a strangely Faustian bargain: in return for a restoration of the contentment they have once known, they will docilely accept a way of life which has been subtly reduced. This diminution in a character's hopes or vision of existence might involve the trade-in of a genuine passion for a therapeutic hobby such as woodworking; or, it might be simply a soundless resignation to the continuation of a barren marriage. In Cheever's fiction, the moment of diminishment is disguised by the gentle and comforting sounds of a jazz band on a cruise ship or rain on the roof. In whatever form, it is disguised so deftly that even the author seems to be left momentarily unsure whether or not his characters have made a prudent choice or whether they have lost their chance at a more fulfilling existence.

This final ambiguity is made still more difficult for the reader to resolve by the tone of Cheever's typical narrator. For, as the narrator chronicles the difficulties of characters who are trapped, his tone generally reflects the attitude of the surrounding society. It is as a member of the chorus that the narrator tells his tale; his outlook expresses the values

of the community, and his plain, pragmatic style of speech mimics the "pretended ineloquence...through which the American has come to speak" (Rourke 72).

In a subtle fashion, this straightforward style of Cheever's narrators is connected to what Mark Twain called the "anti-literary impulse" of American art, the tendency of our authors to extol even as they seemingly deride a view of life that equates abundance and efficiency with spiritual well-being. It is the subtle assumption made by the narrator that the reader shares an outlook which is essentially in accord with middle class values that gives Cheever's fiction its tone of seeming complicitousness and compromise.

Yet, in another sense, the use which Cheever makes of this narrator nails the story home, for it is the very force and ubiquity of the prevailing outlook in American culture that Cheever finally dramatizes. The narrator tries to include the reader in a common point of view as subtly and sinuously as oil slides over still water.

To what degree Cheever was fully aware of his own ambivalent attitude towards the recognized signs of success in America is difficult to ascertain. Certainly, any reader of Cheever's fiction must concede that he often succumbed to his own yearning to be accepted. It was always important to Cheever that he earn his living as a writer, and that except for brief interludes of work in Hollywood and at Barnard

College, he had never been forced to take a job. He liked to tell about the early years when he still lived in the city near the Queensborough Bridge. Every morning he would put on his business suit and ride down in the elevator with the men going to Wall St. and Madison Ave. He would go down to the basement where he "wrote all morning in his boxer shorts, typing away on a portable Underwood set up on a folding table. At lunchtime he would put the suit back on and ride up in the elevator"(Susan Cheever 75).

Keeping up the disguise was at first a matter of humor, a playful way to safely separate himself from the proprieties of upper middle class American life even as he preserved the privileges of popular acceptance. At some point, however, he began occasionally to be fooled by his own skillful portrayal of himself as a spokesman and apologist for American culture;in these moments, Cheever becomes suburban not only in terms of his subject matter, but also with regard to his tone and point of view.

The duplicity which D.H. Lawrence noted in American writing becomes a part of the fascination of Cheever's stories. How often he seems to write "with a tight mental allegiance to a morality which all [his] passion goes to destroy." (Studies in Classic American Literature qtd. in Chase 9). In Cheever's fiction, this conflict becomes the tension between the darkness of his psyche and the false

unwillingness to drive to the depth of the nihilistic darkness he perceives.

In a strange sketch called "A Miscellany of Characters that Will Not Appear" Cheever lists each of the character types and settings which will never again find a place in his fiction. These include

> "all scornful descriptions of American landscapes with ruined tenements, automobile dumps, polluted rivers, jerry-built ranch houses, abandoned miniature golf links....gaudy and fanciful gas stations, unclean motels, candlelit tearooms and streams paved with beer cans.... (CS 552)

The cause for wonder here is not so much that Cheever's work is filled with precisely these "scornful descriptions," but that he could so assiduously attempt to censor himself. Further on in "A Miscellany of Characters that Will Not Appear," he lists "All lushes....they throw so little light on the way we live." One has only to read through Cheever's collected work to feel that the pages are drenched with liquor, that the novels and stories not only detail the manners of a hard drinking society, but also take their characteristic narrative rhythm from the unpredictable and violent changes of the alcoholic temperament.

"And while we are at it," Cheever concludes, "out go all those homosexuals who have taken such a dominating position

in recent fiction" (CS 554). That Cheever was able to ignore this last prohibition, at least in Falconer, is a testament to his courage. Nevertheless, his effort at self censorship remains a serious concern. For it impels him to "celebrate a world that lies spread out around us like a bewildering and stupendous dream" ("Miscellany" 558), and to deny the dark nightmare of contemporary American existence that kept forcing itself into his fiction. This element of nightmare infuses Cheever's suburban settings with their gothic quality of black magic, and allows the seemingly placid suburban environment to become an emblem of what Richard Chase calls "the underside of consciousness" (The American Novel and its Tradition ix).

It is this grinning mask of deviltry floating just beneath the surface of Cheever's best fiction that produces an element of grotesque. In Cheever's created world, appearance rarely represents reality and "the familiar world is suddenly seen from a perspective which renders it strange in either a comic or terrifying way..." (Kayser qtd. in Thompson 18). A handsome man named Gee-Gee compulsively strips off his clothes at suburban dinner parties to dance naked on the table; a beautiful but homicidal housewife goes out to water her plants in the midst of a downpour. Acting out their desperation, Cheever's characters fall into a pattern of repetitive action that rigidifies into absurdity. As their troubles grow seemingly more trivial, their reactions become ever more radical:

> I, Nils Jugstrum, promise myself that if I am not a member of the Gory Brook Country Club by the time I am twenty-five years old I will hang myself. ("A Vision of the World" CS 604)

Children are made the innocent sacrifices to an adult world that endangers their lives. They are mangled in ski tows, made ill by ant poison, and nearly killed on the altar of an empty church. Violence is never far away, and with a zany sort of logic it tends to explode in settings associated with the reassuring ordinariness of daily life. A half-crazed secretary threatens her boss with a pistol concealed in her handbag as they ride the communter train to Shady Hill; a father almost smashes his son's head with a club when they get into an argument while playing miniature golf. The laughable merges with the horrifying to form a darkly comic grotesque. It is this strange "poetry of disorder" in Cheever's stories and novels that connects his work to a central tradition in American fiction.

Chapter Two

Family: The Primal Prison

In school the white limbs beyond the study hall shook out a greenness, and the tennis courts became white and scalding. The air was empty and hard, and the vacant wind dragged shadows over the road. I knew all this only from the classrooms. I knew about the trees from the window frames. I knew the rain only from the sounds on the roof. I was tired of seeing spring with walls and awnings to intercept the sweet sun and the hard fruit. I wanted to go outdoors and see the spring. I wanted to feel and taste the air and be among the shadows....

Jon Cheever,[1] "Expelled" published in New Republic, October 1930 after Cheever had just been expelled from Thayer Academy for reasons that are still unclear.

Teachers often write brilliant things about their pupils, but it is very seldom that pupils of preparatory school age are able to return the compliment. Jon Cheever is an exception. Last spring he was expelled from an academy in Massachusetts at the end of his junior year. In the following sketches, written at the age of seventeen, he reproduces the atmosphere of an institution where education is served out dry in cakes, like Pemmican.

Malcolm Cowley's "Introduction" to Cheever's story, "Expelled"

Professional so-called penologists travel from coast to coast speaking on prison reform. But where does prison reform begin? In bookstores? In lecture halls? No. Prison reform, like all sincere endeavors at reform, begins at home, and where is home? Home is prison!

John Cheever, Falconer

The potential for violence in a type of fiction that

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[1] Cheever went through a short period during adolescence in which he chose to change the spelling of his first name.

would strive to keep dangerous perceptions concealed within a tone of humorous acceptance emerged from Cheever's sense of the family as an inescapable prison.

Although Cheever instinctively attempted to disguise the intensity of his feeling through the formal balance and elegance of his prose, his most successful early stories are dark visions of family disorder. Again and again, children are wounded or lost through the negligence of their wealthy parents; brothers lash out at each other in a frenzy of love and hate; wives rob their husbands of self respect while husbands--if they stay at home--retreat into private obsession.

Cheever always maintained that these stories were not "crypto-autobiographical." He resented it when reviewers pointed out the resemblances between his life and his fiction as if the presence of autobiographical material would cast doubt on his powers of invention. Yet in one of the more brilliant early, uncollected stories, "In the Beginning" (1937), Cheever even uses himself as a character called John Cheever. Another early story, "The Temptations of Emma Boynton"(1949) is based on a distant relative of Cheever's, a feisty, elderly spinster with a Ph.D. from Harvard in Classical Studies named Anna Boynton Thomas, who starved herself to death in protest against the famine in Europe following World War I (Donaldson 22-23).

The story is told by a young man remembering that during his childhood a distant relative named Emma Boynton "came to live, and presumably, to die" with his family. Emma is in her seventies, a retired teacher of Greek, an eccentric who wears black in the winter and white in the summer, and embodies the spirit of New England that Henry James evoked in The Bostonians:

> Ignorance was Emma's adversary, and she fought it tirelessly. When she lived with us, she kept a set of an enclyclopedia behind her chair in the dining room, in order to settle with accuracy and dispatch all the arguments that arose at the table. She thought of all sensuality as a mode of ignorance, and she despised rich food, luxury, or anything else that caused men to hesitate in their search for truth. (New Yorker, 26 Nov. 1949, 29-31)

The tone of the story darkens, however, as it becomes clear that Emma's compassion for those who are starving in Europe is becoming a deadly obsession. When Emma Boynton joins the narrator's family on Thanksgiving, she looks at the abundant table and says, "I am ashamed of you, Lucy! I am ashamed of you for having turkey while people are starving in Levant!" Each week, the old lady reduces her own diet more

drastically in her determination to send the remainder of her limited funds to a relief agency. When she has restricted herself to "apples, canned tomatoes, peanuts, olive oil, cheese, raisins, and water crackers" the family's concern mounts:

> My mother took the old woman's hands and began to talk about the snow that had fallen that week, for both of these women, neither of them young, had been so well drilled in the homely manners of their time and place that now, when one of them was dying, they could not come to the point without first discussing the weather. (31)

It is all in vain, however, for the old lady not only refuses to change her regimen, but also becomes bitterly resentful of the family's interference. At the end, when the family has exhausted all means of intervention, the old lady dies in a nearby nursing home:

> She died at the end of that week, and since the road to the cemetary went by our house, we saw the hearse and the mourners on their way, but all the arrangements had been made by some cousins more distant than we, and while everything in our power had been done, a member of our family, of the

> middle class, for reasons of conscience
> that even to my mother, who knew their origins,
> seemed eccentric and mysterious, had starved to
> death. (31)

In its concern for the strange effects of moral obsession, and for those who make themselves "outcasts of the universe," the story shows the influence of Hawthorne. It is probably not coincidental that the narrator finds an old copy of The Marble Faun in Emma's meadow, and sees the nearby mountains as "much climbed, overpraised, and suggesting, in whatever sense of the past they induced, Nathaniel Hawthorne rather than the savage Indians for whom they were named." (31).

The power of the old to wound the younger generation through their stubborn unwillingness to relinquish disabling obsessions recurs in "Homage to Shakespeare" (1937), a story which Cheever developed from the strange bits of information he could glean concerning his grandfather, Aaron Winters Cheever. No one in the Cheever family--particularly Cheever's father Frederick--ever alluded to the shady details of Aaron's life. From what John Cheever could learn, Aaron had abandoned his wife and their two sons Frederick and Hamlet when his passion for Shakespeare became so obsessive that he lost his grip on the everyday world of Newburyport, Mass. In his youth,

Aaron Cheever had bought an illustrated edition of Shakespeare's complete works and taken it to sea with him. The majesty of Shakespeare's tragic heroes became the source of Aaron's grandiose conception of himself as a man of rare genius unjustly treated by an evil and low minded populace. Instead of searching for business opportunities, he let his family go hungry and finally left their home carrying a trunk of clothes and the fatal buckram-bound volume of Shakespeare.

In Cheever's fictional treatment, the grandfather's immersion in the plays of Shakespeare slowly unfits him for life. This process of deterioration is furthered by the prideful and egocentric nature of the grandfather who behaves as if Shakespeare has in some way become his own personal possession, a trust bequeathed to him from the moment he first purchased the illustrated volume of plays:

> The book was heavily annotated. The sonorous speeches from Coriolanus and Lear and Macbeth that damned men for their treachery and their little faith, were underlined, and the margins were filled with praise of Shakespeare. It was done without any humility, without any conception of the fact that Shakespeare had been the property of other men before him for a couple of centuries. (HOM 73)

Like so many of Cheever's male characters, the grandfather remembers the glory of his past when he won first prize in school for public speaking and when he shipped out for Calcutta on one of his great uncle's merchant vessels . Now, having sold his father's sail-making business, he sits in the chill New England parlor he shares with his wife and children reading his buckram-bound volume while his wife cleans and cooks the sad remainders of what little food they have left for dinner. At odds with these mean surroundings, the grandfather feels "lonely and lecherous," and indulges his lusts with a barmaid in the local tavern. Driven to desperation, his wife takes their children to live with her brother. Years later, when the grandson looks at the faded volume of Shakespeare, and tries to write of its meaning for his grandfather and for their family, he can only wonder that the objects his grandfather left behind--the book, a studded trunk, and a tintype portrait of himself "with his angry features looking through the luster [are] the only relics of that life for all its racking illusion and ambition" (73). Only the narrator who now lives in "a furnished room and a foreign city" is left to wrest some meaning from the bare outlines of his grandfather's life story.

Cheever was always painfully aware of both the insufficiency of family legend and its power to inhabit his

imagination. In later stories, he would make explicit his dislike for the way family myths tend to harden with each telling, romanticizing unsavory characters and covering morally ambiguous incidents with deceptive allure. It is in these early portraits of his New England forbears, however, that Cheever perhaps unconsciously draws his first fictional characters who approximate the grotesque. For each of these characters has become so intensely limited that there is only one rigid response left with which to meet the demands of existence. Without the capacity for any sort of spontaneity, they are baffled at the way life seems to thwart their efforts. In the face of this rejection, they become bitter or morbid, and a certain grim determination not to surrender their defensive posture takes hold.[2]

Although Cheever wrote in the Preface to The Stories of John Cheever that he found much of his early work "embarrassingly immature," a number of the first, largely unknown stories are brilliant, dark evocations of the violence

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[2] For a definition of grotesque as it relates to fictional characters see Irving Howe, Sherwood Anderson, Wm Sloane Assoc., 1951, pp. 98-107. Howe writes that for most of the figures in Winesburg "it is too late for anything to happen; they can only muse over the traumas which have so harshly limited their spontaneity. Stripped
of their animate wholeness and twisted into frozen postures of defense, they are indeed what Anderson has called them: grotesques....

The conception of the grotesque, as actually developed in the stories, is not merely that it is an unwilled affliction but also that it is a mark of once sentient striving...."

which can suddenly break through the illusion of family stability. One of the finest is "Happy Birthday, Enid" (The Way Some People Live) a strange and insightful portrait of Enid, a child of six whose birthday is being celebrated lavishly by her parents, Ellen and Mark Charles.

Ellen and Mark have married late, each for the second time. They are wealthy and now live in a country mansion with a maid and a nurse for Enid. On the day before Enid's birthday party, an unpleasant neighbor named Mrs. Hayward calls and threatens to notify the police unless Enid stops stealing her flowers. That evening, Mark Charles, the father, tells Enid firmly that "if she's a good girl, she can have her party tomorrow, and if she's disobedient, she can't" (The New Yorker, 13 July 1940, pp. 15-16). The child goes to bed weeping and hours later, when Mark goes upstairs, he still hears her sobbing. The sound makes him feel old. But, he and Ellen finish the perfect little dollhouse they have made for Enid's birthday. The dollhouse is an exact replica of their home, complete with window blinds, furniture, and electric lights.

On the day of the party, Enid is entranced with the dollhouse. The party seems to proceed smoothly. It is all very picturesque, the children sitting at a birthday table on the south lawn while the parents are served drinks and canapes on the terrace. But after the guests have left and Enid is

waiting for the nurse to come and give her a bath, she pretends that the dollhouse is Mrs. Hayward's house, and that to get into it, she and her sister must break a window. Carried away, the two little girls slowly push their fingers through the cellophane windows; then, in rising excitement, they demolish all the furniture of the "dirty old house." The children's wild destructiveness becomes strangely horrifying for it clearly expresses their fury at the real circumstances of their lives. They, too, are part of the furniture of their parents'house, valued in proportion to the degree they maintain a decorative appearance. Enid feels the falsity, and in her childish wisdom and fury punches holes in it all. "In the Beginning" marked Cheever's own beginning as a writer who would always be driven to explore the "heart of darkness" in each of the dollhouse worlds he would encounter. It is the careless world of the wealthy that Cheever penetrates in "The Sutton Place Story," written in 1946 and published in Cheever's second volume of short stories, The Enormous Radio and Other Stories.(1953) [3] Deborah Tennyson is the three year

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[3] Cheever's first volume of stories, The Way Some People Live was published in 1943. None of the stories in this volume was selected for The Collected Stories of John Cheever which came out in 1980. The Enormous Radio, Cheever's second collection, did not appear until 1953. Cheever had been discouraged by the lukewarm reception of the first stories. Reviewers called them slight and criticized the endings as being too facile. Many of the stories in The Way Some People Live are fictional treatments of Cheever's experience as a non-combat soldier in World War II. Others deal with inhabitants of seedy rooming houses, race track gamblers, and young people trying to get established in New York City. Many are

old daughter of Katherine and Robert who live expenisve lives, drink a great deal, and see their child only when the nurse brings her into the living room at bedtime to say goodnight. As if resigned to the indifferent and secretly neglectful nurse her parents have hired, Deborah begins to protect herself by creating a secret fantasy world:

> The child had never complained about Mrs. Harley; it was as though she already understood the evil importance of appearances. Deborah was taciturn about the way in which she spent her days. She would tell no one where she had been or what she had done. Mrs. Harley found that she could count on this trait, and so the child and the old woman had come to share a number of secrets. (CS 78)

One of the secrets is that Mrs. Harley frequently leaves the child for a few hours with an acquaintance of the Tennysons, a middle aged radio actress named Renee Hall. This arrangement suits everyone, for Renee is lonely, and Mrs.

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almost sketches in their brief illumination of a moment or an incident in a character's life who is already somewhat marginalized. A few of the stories which remain uncollected, however, belie Cheever's estimate of them as immature, and deserve a place among America's finest short fiction._

Harley is often ordered to keep the child outdoors even when the park is chilly and desolate. On a Sunday morning, while Renee is distracted as she dresses for a luncheon date, the child simply walks out of her living room, goes down the elevator, and disappears into the city. Although the parents are frantic, and the police eventually recover the little girl, there is only a muted response from the child when her father rushes into the police station. Her secret world has become more alluring than the loveless reality of her Sutton Place life. Somewhat impassively, she goes on eating a piece of bread she is holding, and will only say, "The lady gave the bread...I had to find Martha." (CS 92) The child's emotional distance is frightening to the father, yet there is no suggestion that he grasps the significance of her silence in response to his frantic questions:

> " What lady gave you the bread, Deborah? Where have you been? Who is Martha? Where have you been? He knew that she would never tell him and that as long as he lived he would never know, and against his palm he could feel the strong beating of her heart, but he went on asking, "Where have you been? Who gave you the bread? Who is Martha?" (CS 78)

In the image of the father's palm against the child's rapid heart, there is a subtle suggestion that the child is now a fallen bird, frightened, mysterious, and waiting for the moment when it can once again fly free.

If the child is a broken bird in "The Sutton Place Story," the daughter in Cheever's story, "The Hartleys" is a sacrificial offering to the parents' marital agony. Mr. and Mrs. Hartley have returned to the Pemaquoddy Inn with their daughter Anne. Almost compulsively, Mr. Hartley informs Mrs. Butterick, the innkeeper and everyone else with whom he converses that the inn has been a part of the couple's past:

> Mrs. Hartley and I were here eight years ago February," Mr. Hartley said. "We came on the twenty-third and were here for ten days. I remember the date clearly because we had such a wonderful time." (CS 58)

Although the couple seems determined to recapture some of the delight of their remembered holiday, they now seem under strain. Each day, when they try to leave Anne in a ski class for beginners, she slips away to spend all afternoon alone in a hut on the mountain. And, one night, when the parents ask that their dinner be served upstairs in their room, the maid hears Mrs. Hartley's voice through the open

transom, "a voice so uncontrolled, so gutteral and full of suffering, that she stopped and listened as if the woman's life were in danger" (CS 62):

> "Why do we have to come back?" Mrs. Hartley was crying. "Why do we have to come back? Why do we have to make these trips back to the places where we thought we were happy? What good is it going to do? What good has it ever done? We go back to the restaurants, the mountains, we go back to the houses, even the neighborhoods, we walk in the slums, thinking that this will make us happy, and it never does. Why in Christ's name did we ever begin such a wretched thing? Why isn't there an end to it? Why can't we separate again? It was better that way. Wasn't it better that way? It was better for Anne--I don't care what you say, it was better for her than this. I'll take Anne again and you can live in town. Why can't I do that, why can't I, why can't I, why can't I...." (CS 63)

There is something uncanny and grotesque in Mr. Hartley's attempt to regain lost happiness through the repetition of events which in the past had yielded pleasure. This same

emphasis on repetition leads to the final tragedy when the Hartleys join a crowd of skiiers who have gathered on the hill in front of the inn. Harsh weather has closed down most of the trails and those who want to ski must use the old fashioned tow that the innkeeper's son has built. The ride up the hill and the skiing down take on a hynotic rhythm as Anne and her parents go "again and again over the same surface, like people who, having lost a ring or a key on the beach, search again and again in the same sand" (CS 64). Only the creak and rattle of the tow can be heard until suddenly Anne's shrieks pierce the winter afternoon:

> Her arm had got caught in the frayed rope; she had been thrown to the ground and was being dragged brutally up the hill toward the iron wheel. "Stop the tow," her father roared....But there was no one there to stop it. Her screams were hoarse and terrible, and the more she struggled to free herself from the rope, the more violently it threw her to the ground. Space and the cold seemed to reduce the voices--even the anguish in the voices--of the people who were calling to stop the tow, but the girl's cries were piercing until her neck was broken on the iron wheel. (CS 64)

Even the manner of Anne's death is circular in the grip of an "iron wheel" that suggests a certain inevitability to her fate. Because she is enmeshed in the dissolution of her parents' marriage, her death becomes the blood offering which will keep the Hartleys together. As Mr.and Mrs. Hartley drive back down to New York with the hearse carrying Anne's body following them, Mr. Hartley gently tucks a blanket around his wife in a new, almost romantic tenderness.

The pressure of family violence which so often erupts into grotesque forms of spiritual or physical death occasionally shatters the unity of some of Cheever's less successful early stories. "When Grandmother Goes," published in The New Yorker (14 Dec. 1940, pp. 56-58) and collected in The Way Some People Live is in many respects an artistic failure . In a comparatively short space, Cheever introduces too many characters who are little more than caricatures of venality and emptiness. The story conveys the maddening boredom and exasperation of family gatherings, the banality of conversation, and the subtle cruelties with which members ferret out each other's vulnerabilities and then attack.

During the course of one Sunday afternoon in the suburban home of the widowed grandmother, Mrs. Welles, the four generations of her family uncover the greed and animosities which become bonds as unbreakable as genuine ties of affection. Mrs. Welles remarks that she would like to ax their

aging and somewhat senile minister although she, too, has memory lapses. When she refuses to pay for her great grandchild to go to a private girls' school in the city because "Mr. Welles did not believe in private schools," Robert and Elizabeth, Mrs. Welles's grandchildren, secretly wish she would die. Although he is only twenty-eight, Robert's hair is falling out, he has never "done anything," and he thinks wistfully of how nice it would be if he could work as a caretaker on some place in the Adirondacks. An older member of the family, Bronson, wonders miserably why he ever comes out to the suburban house for family get-togethers, yet the implication is clear that they will all keep assembling until they destroy one another.

In another story, "There They Go," (The New Yorker 19 July 1941, pp. 17-18) which is so slight that it is more a sketch than a fully developed piece of short fiction, Cheever describes the life of a young couple in New York who begin to find that their own lives are so dreary that they prefer to stand at the windows of their darkened apartment watching the glamorous activities of a couple in the neighboring building. Gradually, they come to depend on these hours of fantasy in which they imagine the seemingly glamorous life of the man and woman whose lives are so near and yet so distant. When the people across the way dress for a party one evening, turn out the lights, and leave their apartment, it is a strange grief

to the couple who can only watch their neighbors' departure and say wistfully, "There they go."

Cheever's awareness of marital boredom as a particular form of confinement becomes the source for one of his finest stories, "The Season of Divorce" (CS). The story is told by an unnamed narrator, a realistic, eminently practical man who likes to think of his marriage as "happy and resourceful" (137). For his wife, Ethel, however, the marriage is essentially a grueling and changeless routine. It pleases her husband that at any moment of the day, he can imagine her probable activity:

> She gets up at seven and turns the radio on. After she is dressed, she rouses the children and cooks the breakfast. Our son has to be walked to the school bus at eight o'clock. When Ethel returns from this trip, Carol's hair has to be braided. I leave the house at eight-thirty, but I know that every move that Ethel makes for the rest of the day will be determined by the housework, the cooking, the shopping, and the demands of the children. I know that on Tuesdays and Thursdays she will be at the A & P between eleven and noon, that on every clear afternoon she will be on a certain bench in a playground from three until five,

> that she cleans the house on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and polishes the silver when it rains. (137)

It does not concern the husband that his wife's activities are predictable and tedious, or that she once hung her college diploma over the kitchen sink as a desperate sort of joke about the limitations of her present life. Only one moment in Ethel's routine causes him to take genuine notice of her. Each evening after she has bathed and fed the children, set the dining room table with china and cooked the dinner, "she stands in the middle of the room as if she has lost or forgotten something, and this moment of reflection is so deep" that she seems briefly to enter a strange and secluded world of her own. Then "she lights the four white candles in their silver sticks" and resumes the "cheerful and adaptable" demeanor that her husband knows (138).

Although they do not go out often, they have become friendly with a couple named the Trenchers. Mrs. Trencher is plain and timid, and Dr. Trencher has clear blue eyes, pink cheeks, and "the singular optimism of a well-adjusted physician" (138). In the portrait of these two married couples, Cheever suggests the silent separation that exists between each husband and wife, the disappointment that binds them together in a resignation which has now taken the place

of whatever affection once united them. Disappointment seems almost to fill the Trencher's quiet old townhouse like a vapour; they are childless, and when Mrs. Trencher feeds her dachshund a few scraps from the table ,she does it furtively, "as if she has been forbidden to do this" (163).

The particular strength of this story lies in its presentation of the secrecy that is concealed beneath the surface of most marriages, and the charged dissatisfaction between a husband and a wife that remains quiescent for year after year until it suddenly erupts. This tear in the surface of normalcy occurs when Dr. Trencher begins to visit Ethel in the playground where she takes her children in the afternoons. At first, Ethel assumes that he is bored, that perhaps he doesn't have many patients, and simply wants someone with whom to chat. Then when she and her husband are washing dishes one night, she mentions that Dr. Trencher's behavior seems unusual, that he sighs and stares at her. With his customary cynicism, the husband immediately discounts the possibility that any man could fall in love with Ethel:

> I know what my wife looks like in the playground. She wears an old tweed coat, overshoes, and Army gloves, and a scarf is tied under her chin. The playground is a fenced and paved lot between a slum and the river. The picture of the well-dressed, pink-

> cheeked doctor losing his heart to Ethel in this environment was hard to take seriously.(CS 139)

But Trencher's passion is real. He begins to walk the dachshund each night so that he can stand under a streetlight and stare up at Ethel's windows. The husband becomes worried not so much that his wife will desire the odd little doctor, but that she will feel pity for him and thus be unwilling to cause him grief.

When he takes the children out for a Sunday walk, the husband feels the strange threat of dissolution which has touched his life and which seems now to be reflected in the late afternoon shadows of the city in midwinter:

> As it got late, it got cold and clear and still, and on the stillness the waste from the smokestacks along the East River seemed to articulate... whole words and sentences. Halcyon. Disaster. They were hard to make out. It seemed the ebb of the year--an evil day for gastritis, sinus, and respiratory disease--and remembering other winters, the markings of the light convinced me that it was the season of divorce. (CS 144)

The husband's foreboding is borne out when, a few evenings later, Dr. Trencher rings their doorbell and declares

his love. There is a brief scuffle, the doctor is unceremoniously asked to leave, and that is all. Some nights later, the husband wakes at two in the morning to find Ethel weeping in the kitchen. When he asks her why she is crying, she answers that she is crying because she saw a drunken old woman on the street who was cuffing a little boy, because her father died when she was twelve, because of some unkindness that she can't even remember.

At the end of the story nothing has changed. Time has passed. A bizarre crisis has been avoided, and the four lives that have been affected soon show no discernible trace of what has occurred.

Occasionally, the husband sees Dr. Trencher on the bus, or notices that Mrs. Trencher looks old as she goes into the lending library with Fraulein the dachshund on her leash. Ethel never mentions the Trenchers and still keeps to her old domestic routine. It is perhaps only in the strange evening reveries she still surrenders to as she lights the candles in their four white sticks that there is any visible sign of her sense of confinement and loss.

The strategy which Cheever adopts in "The Season of Divorce"-- and which he will use frequently in the later stories that resolve through the characters' pained acceptance of a reduced definition of their lives--requires a narrator who speaks with the voice of firm practicality. To the narrator in "The Season of Divorce," uncontrolled feeling

becomes the dangerous precursor to domestic upset; consequently, he must hold on tightly to a middle voice of reasonableness. Cheever is clever enough to endow this voice with sufficient humor and charm to beguile a reader into a sense that the narrator is somehow "right," that maturity does in fact exact the sacrifice of passion and idealism if we are to pass our days with any expectation of ease. But at the edge of the story--and of Cheever's consciousness as well--a doubt remains regarding the worth of conformity to a rather threadbare way of life.

This conflict between a narrative voice which represents acquiescence to the world as it is and the dissenting voice of another character who insistently challenges the narrator's vision is embodied frequently through two brothers whose mutual antipathy is nearly lethal.

"Goodbye, My Brother" (1951) sets the conflict in terms of the narrator's detestation of his younger brother's gloomy determination to see their family as a symbol of extravagant and foolish frivolity. The narrator of the story confesses a troubled dislike for Lawrence, an aversion which is shared by the rest of the Pommeroy family. In a family descended from Protestant ministers, Lawrence "looks like a Puritan cleric" and reminds the narrator of their ancestors' "harshness of thought" (CS 6). The fight which erupts between the two brothers echoes the fury of Cain and Abel. Lawrence

has come to vacation with the family in their summer place on Laud's Head, one of the Massachusetts islands. The family has suffered its share of losses--the father drowned, and a daughter recently divorced--but they manage to take pleasure in each other and in the beauties of the seashore. Their summer days and nights are passed in a round of upper class delights: tennis on their private court in the morning, flower shows, Martinis before dinner, backgammon on the terrace, and boat club costume dances that last all night. Only Lawrence with his skinny wife and timid children holds back from full participation, a resistance which seems, to the narrator, a distorted remnant of the family's Puritan heritage:

> With his mouth set, my brother looked to me then like a Puritan cleric. Sometimes, when I try to understand his frame of mind, I think of the beginnings of our family in this country....The branch of the Pommeroys to which we belong was founded by a minister who was eulogized by Cotton Mather for his untiring abjuration of the Devil. The Pommeroys were ministers until the middle of the nineteenth century, and the harshness of their thought--man is full of misery, and all earthly beauty is corrupt--has been preserved in books and

> sermons. The temper of our family changed somewhat and became more lighthearted, but when I was of school age, I can remember a cousinage of old men and women who seemed to hark back to the dark days of the ministry and to be animated by perpetual guilt and the deification of the scourge. If you are raised in this atmosphere--and in a sense we were--I think it is a trial of the spirit to reject its habits of guilt, self-denial, taciturnity, and penitence, and it seemed to me to have been a trial of the spirit in which Lawrence had succumbed. (CS 6)

When Lawrence sourly reminds the narrator of the "realities" concerning their family--that the divorced sister is promiscuous, the mother nearly an alcoholic, the older brother dishonest, and the house ready to fall into the sea--the narrator picks up a root from the beach and swings at his brother so violently that Lawrence's head is bloodied.

The fight which erupts between the two brothers is the fight that Cheever never fully resolved between the two aspects of his own personality. In his urgent determination to escape the moralistic and dark side of his own nature, he expunged from his fiction, in story after story, the character

who refuses to revel in sensuous and frivolous delight. "Oh, what can you do with a man like that?" the narrator asks. "How can you teach him to respond to the inestimable greatness of the race, the harsh surface beauty of life; how can you put his finger for him on the obdurate truths before which fear and horror are powerless?"(CS 21). Yet, in the narrator's--and in Cheever's--discomfort with darkness there is a reduction of vision which diminishes the capacity to render unpleasant truths with a steady hand. In any confrontation with human evil, despair, or melancholy, Cheever's tendency was to embody those traits which he considered the legacy of Puritansim in the one brother who must be made so unlikable or even grotesque that it seems a relief when the "good" brother finally beats him down.

To some extent, Cheever was aware of his difficulty. In a short piece written for the Brooks and Warren textbook, Understanding Fiction, in which he explained how the idea for "Goodbye, My Brother" came to him, he describes his aversion to a type of moral seriousness that seemed, to him, to verge on morbid asceticism:

> I come from a Puritanical family and I had been taught as a child that a moral lies beneath all human conduct and that the moral is always detrimental to man. I count among my relations

> people who feel that there is some inexpugnable nastiness at the heart of life and that love, friendship, Bourbon whisky, lights of all kinds--are merely the crudest deceptions. My aim as a writer has been to record a moderation of these attitudes--an escape from them if this seemed necessary....(571)

Cheever's personal escape began in 1975 when he conquered the illness of alcoholism after treatment in the Smithers Institute. But whether he was ever able in his fiction to overcome the latent conviction that indeed "there was some inexpugnable nastiness at the heart of life" is doubtful. His final novel, Falconer,[4] is set in the world of a maximum security penitentiary, a world so horrifying as Cheever describes it that the only escape is through an orthodox Christian faith that encompasses belief in miracle. And it is, once again, the anquish of hatred between two brothers that causes Ezekiel Farragut to murder his brother Eben and be sentenced to the Falconer Rehabilitative Facility.

For the crime of fratricide, Ezekiel Farragut is brought to Falconer on "a late summer's day." As the seasonal cycle is turning towards death, so, too, will Farragut have to die

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[4] Cheever wrote Oh What a Paradise it Seems after Falconer, but Paradise is a minor work, a novella of 105 pages.

to his former life as a professor, a married man, and a father within the grotesque underworld of cellblock F. It is a world populated by "fucks, freaks, fools, fruits, first-timers, fat-asses..., phantoms, funnies, fanatics, feebies, fences, and farts" (9). The warden who has memorized this alliterative list is a guard called Tiny, a man whose "size is frightening [and] so unnatural that his clothes would have had to be sewn for him alone" (9).

The jail is sunless, and the prisoners are shades whose original identies have been lost or forgotten and who are now simply called Mad Dog Killer, Tennis, Ransome, Cuckold, or Chicken Number Two. As Farragut is brought to Falconer, his journey suggests a descent into Hades:

> Farragut (fratricide, zip to ten, #734-508-32) had been brought to this old iron place on a late summer's day. He wore no leg irons but was manacled to nine other men....The windows of the van were so high and unclean that he could not see the color of the sky or any of the lights and shapes of the world he was leaving. He had been given forty milligrams of methadone three hours earlier and, torpid, he wanted to see the light of day. The driver, he noticed, stopped for traffic lights, blew his horn and brake on steep hills, but this was all they

seemed to share with the rest of humanity. (4)

The three men who question and test Farragut upon his arrival are like the mythical Minos, Rhadamanthus, and Aeacus who are the judges of the dead. It is they who assign him to Cellblock F, the last confinement which is, in essence, a macrocosm of the imprisonment Farragut has endured in his marriage.

Falconer's wife Marcia is so cruel that when she visits Farragut she refuses to bring a photograph of their son, refuses even to let Farragut touch her hand. Instead, when he asks her how she is faring, she replies, "You are the biggest mistake I ever made....I thought that my life was one hundred percent frustration, but when you killed your brother I saw that I had underestimated my problems" (26).

Farragut's act of fratricide is in part accidental--he struck Eben with a fire iron and in the fall Eben hit his head on the hearth--but it is nonetheless motivated by hatred. It is Eben who always enjoyed telling Farragut that their father wanted to have him aborted, a revelation which Farragut identifies as the cause of his addiction to heroin. Farragut's disillusion with his mother had been equally great and equally harmful to his ability to thrive:

There is a Degas painting of a woman with a bowl

> of chrysanthemums that had come to represent to Farragut the great serenity of "mother." The world kept urging him to match his own mother, a famous arsonist, snob, gas pumper, and wing shot, against the image of the stranger with her autumnal and bitter-smelling flowers. Why had the universe encouraged this gap? Why had he been encouraged to cultivate so broad a border of sorrow...? The opium eater knew better. (56)

Farragut's addiction to drugs imprisons him in a daily rhythm of physical necessity. When he is denied his Methadone, he descends into a torture which the guards enjoy watching as just another "withdrawal show." Drug addiction, sexual longing, hunger and desire for cigarettes mark the hours of the prisoners' days and nights so obsessively that physical need becomes a kind of prison within the prison of Falconer. Cheever's desire was always to write of the sensual world with a kind of rhapsodic lyricism, yet his own ambivalent relation to sexuality often subverted his intent. In Falconer, the descriptions of sexual need among the prisoners are tormented and grotesque visions of almost surreal intensity:

> It was not that night but sometime later that

> the Cuckold told Farragut about the Valley. The Valley was a long room off the tunnel to the left of the mess hall. Along one wall was a cast-iron trough of a urinal. The light in the room was very dim. The wall above the urinal was white tiling with a very limited power of reflection. You could make out the height and the complexion of the men on your left and your right and that was about all. The Valley was where you went after chow to fuck yourself. Almost no one but killjoys strayed into the dungeon for a simple piss. There were ground rules. You could touch the other man's hips and shoulders, but nothing else. The trough accommodated twenty men and twenty men stood there soft, hard, or halfway in either direction, fucking themselves. If you finished and wanted to come again you went to the end of the line....
>
> There was some rightness in having the images of the lovers around them opaque. They were universal, they were phantoms, and any skin sores, or signs of cruelty, ugliness, stupidity or beauty, could not be seen. (118)

The explicitness with which Cheever catalogues the prisoners' sexual behavior only works to make the obliteration

of individuality associated with sex more horrifying; the men, in their sexual throes become mere shadows of themselves, interchangable save for the surface markings by which even non-human forms of life are differentiated. In this way, Cheever subtly associates sexual need with all of the other forces which imprison and reduce men to mere cogs in the functioning of a totalitarian system.

Yet, Cheever also allowed himself, in this final novel, to write of the love between two men with a musing tenderness. Farragut's love for Jody, a fellow prisoner who is much younger and far more beautiful than the middle-aged Farragut, allows a trusting simplicity between them that is never available to the straight men of Cheever's suburbs. And it is Ezekiel Farragut's tenderness towards the aged and dying Chicken Number Two that provides the opportunity for Farragut's final escape from Falconer.

Chicken Number Two is an old and decrepit convict who likes to play his guitar and sing sad ballads. He is utterly alone in the world, an NKRC in prison lingo, a man with no known relatives or concerned. When the prisoners are given the chance to have their pictures taken beside a fully decorated Christmas tree so that holiday greetings can be sent to their families, Chicken fills in the required address form with "Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus. Icicle Street. The North Pole." (164). The dandyish photographer is ready to laugh at

the joke of this address "when he suddenly grasped the solemnity of Chicken's loneliness. No one at all laughed at this hieroglyph of pain, and Chicken, sensing the stillness at this proof of his living death, swung his head around, shot up his skinny chin and said gaily, 'My left profile's my best'" (164).

But Chicken is dying and since there is no room for him in the infirmary, the guard Tiny asks Farragut to take the sick old man into his cell. Gently, Farragut washes him, holds his hand, and listens as Chicken talks softly of his strange lack of fear. He has always distrusted people who claimed to be fearless in the face of death, but now he senses that there must be some sort of afterlife. His death is easy, surrounded by the same kind of grotesque comedy that has defined his life:

> Farragut...went to the chair beside Chicken Number Two's bed and took the dying man's warm hand in his. He seemed to draw from Chicken Number Two's presence a deep sense of freeness; he seemed to take something that Chicken Number Two was lovingly giving to him. He felt some discomfort in the right cheek of his buttocks, and half-standing, he saw that he had been sitting on Chicken's false teeth. "Oh, Chicken," he cried, "you bit me in the ass." His laughter was the laughter of the

deepest tenderness and then he began to sob. (202)

Even in death, Chicken is made to wait. "We can't move no stiffs until twenty-two hundred," Tiny tells Farragut. "That's the law" (202). When the male nurse puts Chicken's body into a long, tan sack and then deposits it in a light metal, canoe-shaped form, Farragut simply changes places with the dead man, putting Chicken's corpse in his bed and zipping himself into the canvas shroud. The men who come to get him in the middle of the night carry Farragut beyond the gates of Falconer where he cuts himself out of the body bag with a razor blade and escapes into the shadowy dawn of a new life.

The religious symbolism is overt: Chicken, a victim of society, dies and in his death Farragut is reborn. Escape from confinement is possible only through faith and love. When he is taken out through the prison gates, Farragut is finally clean: free of his addiction and able to love unselfishly. Farragut's escape echoes the escape Jody, Farragut's lover, has made earlier. When the Cardinal of the archdiocese had come to the prison to say mass in the gallows field, Jody had persuaded the prison chaplain to get him contraband robes so that he could serve as an acolyte and fly out of Falconer in the Cardinal's helicopter.

Within this orthodox Christian framework, Cheever portrays the prisoners as both saints and sinners. In a letter

Farragut sends to his archbishop, he writes that as a prisoner, his life "follows very closely the traditional lives of the saints:"

> We prisoners, more than any men, have suffered for our sins, we have suffered for the sins of society, and our example should cleanse the thoughts of men's hearts because of the grief with which we are acquainted. We are in fact the word made flesh.... (72-73)

Yet, seen in "the last light," the prisoners assume the distorted aspect of the eternally damned:

> None of the cruelties of their early lives--hunger, thirst and beatings--could account for their brutality, their self-destructive thefts and their consuming and perverse addictions. They were souls who could not be redeemed, and while penance was a clumsy and a cruel answer, it was some measure of the mysteriousness of their fall. In the white light they seemed to Farragut to be fallen men. (153)

The two contradictory visions of the prisoners as victims

of a heartless society or as unregenerate sociopaths reveal the unresolved tension of Cheever's moral universe, for he could never truly accommodate or erase either concept. As a result, he kept trying to decipher the mystery of imprisonment itself. "All my work deals with confinement in one shape or another, and the struggle for freedom," he told John Firth in an interview given in 1977. "Do I mean freedom? Only as a metaphor for a sense of boundlessness, the possibility of rejoicing....There are three metaphors for confinement in my books: the small New England Village, the world of affluent exurbia, and now prison." Cheever's obsession with what he referred to as "man's endeavor to interpret the mystery of imprisonment in terms of symbols" (Falconer 3) echoes Hawthorne's troubled musing on the wooden prison in The Scarlet Letter which houses Hester Prynne:

> Before this ugly edifice, and between it and the wheel-track...was a grass plot, much overgrown with ...unsightly vegetation which evidently found something congenial in the soil which had so early borne the black flower of civilized society, a prison. But on one side of the portal...was a wild rose bush....(Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter 272)

In the same way that Hawthorne uses the rose bush outside the heavily timbered oak door of the prison in Boston, Cheever notes that in a tin pitcher on a window sill of the mess hall in Falconer there "were some wax flowers whose colors, in the somber place, seemed fiery" (8). It is paradoxical that although Cheever was so much farther removed from the Puritan influence, it may have had a more harmful effect upon his soul. For there is something chill at the heart of Cheever's fiction, an unloving and rigid disapproval of all those who do not adhere to the laws of good living which he expounds. In rebellion against Puritanic gloom, Cheever strains to substitute faith in the joys of nature and in the sensuous pleasures of existence. But his insistence has a shallow ring, the desperate note of a man struggling to escape what Richard Chase refers to as the dark "underside of consciousness" (ix).

When Cheever allowed the horrors he perceived to infiltrate his fiction, their force broke through the customary restraint of his manner and allowed the grotesque violence that characterizes the world of Falconer. It is a world in which Tiny, the obese guard, takes vengeance upon the cats who eat his London broil while he isn't looking:

> There were more cats in Falconer than there were convicts....Their smell overwhelmed everything, but they checked the rat and mouse population. Farragut

> Farragut had a favorite. So did everybody else....Loneliness taught the intransigent to love their cats as loneliness can change anything on earth....
>
> "Any of you got cats in your cells throw them out," said Tiny. Two cats at the end of the block, thinking perhaps that Tiny had food, came toward him.....Tiny raised his club, way in the air, and caught a cat on the completion of the falling arc, tearing it in two. At the same time another guard bashed in the head of the big cat. Blood, brains, and offal splattered their yellow waterproofs....
>
> Half the cats cased the slaughter and made for the closed door. Half of them wandered around at a loss, sniffing the blood of their kind and sometimes drinking it. Two of the guards vomited and half a dozen cats got killed eating the vomit....When a third guard got sick Tiny said, "O.K., O.K, that's enough for tonight, but it don't give me back my London broil." (40-41)

Cheever's sensibility recoiled from the brutality of scenes such as this even as his pent up rage demanded expression so that at times it seems almost as though there

are two writers struggling within the same mind to gain dominance.

When Farragut escapes from Falconer, he walks down the street on his first morning of freedom thinking, "Rejoice. Rejoice." But for Cheever, there really was no freedom. He was forever caught and enmeshed between his desire to see the world as a place of gladness, and his certainty that it was a place of purgatorial woe.

Chapter Three

The Pot of Gold: Wealth, Poverty, and the Past

"What I understand by manners, then, is a culture's hum and buzz of implication. I mean the whole evanescent context in which its explicit statements are made. It is that part of a culture which is made up of half-uttered or unutterable expressions of value. They are hinted at by small actions, sometimes by the arts of dress or decoration, sometimes by tone, gesture, emphasis, or rhythm, ~~sometimes by the arts of dress or decoration, sometimes by tone, gesture, emphasis, or rhythm~~, sometimes by the words that are used with a special frequency or a special meaning....They make the part of a culture which is not art or religion, or morals, or politics, and yet it relates to all these highly formulated departments of culture...."

---Lionel Trilling, "Manners, Morals and the Novel"

"These stories seem at times to be stories of a long-lost world when the city of New York was still filled with a river light, when you heard Benny Goodman quartets from a radio in the corner stationery store, and when almost everybody wore a hat."

---John Cheever, Preface to <u>The Collected Stories</u>

Much of Cheever's early fiction is concerned with money. That most American of preoccupations became the center from which Cheever was able to work out his sense that the class into which we are born becomes another confinement, an economic and social prison as limiting as the more visible symbols of confinement in his work such as the decaying New England town, the suburb, and the Falconer State Penitentiary.

Although Cheever disliked people who talked about money, he wrote of it perceptively. He had witnessed the anguish of his father during the depression of 1929. And he had gone

through the years in New York City during which his attempt to earn a living by writing required that he endure hardships. Susan Cheever recalls that her father lived in a boarding house when he arrived in New York at the age of eighteen. His room there was so barren that his friend Walker Evans took a black and white photograph of it:

> Evans took a picture of my father's boarding-house room on Hudson Street that is in the Museum of Modern Art now. My father used to say that Walker took the photograph because he couldn't believe that anyone could live in such a miserable place. His camera captured the mood of summer in a tenement, and the pathetic, saving neatness of the poor. In the photograph, an old-fashioned iron bedstead has a thin, carefully folded quilt in one corner. The sheets are perfectly tucked. The blind in one window is drawn, and a hot afternoon light gleams from around its edges through sagging muslin curtains. (Home 23)

Cheever could live in rented rooms, and later--after he had married and was publishing his stories in The New Yorker and making a modest income from his fiction--in rented houses

on wealthy estates and in summer cottages on Martha's Vineyard. He seemed to need the marginal position of being in genteel places that he didn't own. Through this complicated arrangement, he could maintain his identification with a rakish, devil-may-care integrity he associated with the artist's life, yet still live inside the precincts of the privileged. Susan Cheever describes her father's relationship to money as a product of the strange Yankee heritage in which it seemed natural that his parents would respond to his declaration--made when he was still in his teens-- that he wanted to be a writer by telling him that they had no objections so long as he avoided both fame and money:

> Why on earth would my father's parents tell him not to seek wealth or fame? Boston manners, Yankee purity and perversity, the teachings of the Episcopal church, and the Gospel according to St. Matthew where it says, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures here upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal!" seemed almost archaic by 1977 in New York City. However desperate and impoverished my grandparents might have been, they probably felt that wealth and fame were beneath them. But there is so much emphasis

> on wealth and fame these days that the idea of going beyond these things has become profoundly romantic and noble--and very confusing. My father was as confused as anyone. (Home 151)

Because Cheever attributed the wreckage of his parents' marriage to financial anguish, a recurring theme in his early fiction is the way poverty can ruin the relationship between a man and a woman. Two uncollected stories, "Play a March," (1936) and "Forever Hold your Peace,"(1940) deal with the catastrophic consequences of constant worry about money. In "Forever Hold Your Peace," a passive young woman is persuaded by her controlling and foolish friends to give up the down-at-heels man she loves, and to marry a more affluent but stolidly boring businessman. "Play a March," although little more than a sketch, takes place in the drab apartment of a young couple who slowly realize the hopelessness of ever having enough money to buy the nice house they have always dreamed of owning; their intractable poverty begins to make them querulous and irritable. The man finds consolation in playing mournful melodies on the accordion, but the music begins to grate on the nerves of his girlfriend: "Can't you play a march or something?" she asks bitterly, and immediately, the reader senses the unravelling of their pleasure in each other (The New Yorker. 20 June, 1936).

The agony of financial failure becomes particularly painful in Cheever's early fiction when it has so blighted an older man's life that he is made neurotically afraid of all change. "The Law of the Jungle," published in The New Yorker in 1941 and in Cheever's first collection of stories called The Way Some People Live dramatizes the moment in which a fat-cat son who has made his millions by building ships for the army during the second world war comes to his parents' unfashionable house to tell them the good news: he has repurchased the fine home they once owned on Greenwich St. Expecting his parents' gratitude, Freddy Dawes is dumbfounded and resentful when his father resists any change. Old Mr. Dawes has been hurt too badly by the Depression of 1929 to approve of any large investment in real estate that would tie up his son's money. Oddly, Freddy's generous offer and his wife's effusive joy seem only to reawaken Mr. Dawes's fears:

> "I worked hard," Mr. Dawes said. His wife's remarks had irritated him and he lifted his voice and leaned forward in his chair. "I worked hard and intelligently. I not only took care of myself and you and your mother but I saw that the men who worked for me got well paid and taken care of too." The excitement of the recollection seemed to be more than he could

> contain and he got up from his chair and began to stamp around the room, shouting, "I would have been better off if I'd gone to work for the god-damned railroad! Trainmen get pensions. I don't want to stay at the Plaza. I don't want to live on Greenwich Avenue. All I want to know is where I'm going to be buried." (The New Yorker. 22 Mar 1941, 18-20)

The sudden outburst brings with it a collapse into tears and Mr. Dawes hurries back to his chair and sits there with his head turned away so that his family will not notice that he is crying.

Although Cheever almost never included specific political events or attitudes in his fiction, his early stories often dwell on the painful separation between the socio-economic classes within American society. The first story which The New Yorker accepted from him is little more than a portrait of the landlady of a Brooklyn rooming-house who is so determined to uphold the respectability of her establishment that she judges people by the type of suitcase they carry. "He's a very satsfactory tenant, the kind I wish I could get all the time...He has the most beautiful luggage I've ever seen," she tells the narrator who is also temporarily staying in the shabby hostelry. At the story's conclusion, when she hurries

to a tenant who has come in so drunk that he passes out on her stairs, she asks him weakly, "Can't you find the key to your room? Can't you find your key?" ("Brooklyn Rooming House." 25 May 1937, p.77) Of course, it is she herself who has become so fearful of falling through the class hierarchy that she has lost the key to any sort of humane, courageous response.

Cheever was always aware of the peculiar pain of living in a society which denied the reality of a social hierarchy. He both yearned to be accepted by friends of distinguished lineage, while, at the same time, he delighted in telling his children that they were all from the "wrong" branch of the Cheever family, the branch which had been exiled for its Bohemian ways and refusal to adhere to upper class decorum. While Cheever mocked the more genteel side of his family, he also craved some of the advantages that went with their position: money, of course, but also social acceptance and the easy demeanor of those who know that they know the best people, the right places, the proper attitude and costume for any occasion. Cheever's confusion regarding his own status made him sensitive--especially while he was young and before he had won recognition as a writer--to the ambivalence of those who both desired and disdained the privileges of the upper class.

Consequently, it is not entirely fair to dismiss Cheever as an apologist for the suburban values of exclusivity and

class division. In one of his finest early stories called "The Summer Farmer" (The Enormous Room 1948), Cheever portrays the impossibility of real communication between Paul Hollis, a well-to-do New Yorker who has been coming to his family's farm in New Hampshire since childhood, and a Russian emigre named Kasiak who works the adjacent land just below the Hollis place. Kasiak is a dedicated Communist who barely troubles to conceal his scorn for the seeming frivolity of his neighbors.

Cheever builds the story around one summer weekend in which the Hollises decide to purchase two rabbits as pets for their children. They drive to a ramshackle house, choose their rabbits from a cage in the front yard, and notice vaguely that the old man who takes their money is uneasy. As they pull away, they see the source of the old man's concern: a little boy runs from the house to the rabbit cage, and when he sees that his pets are gone, he breaks into a heartbroken lament. It is a tiny moment in the story, without emphasis, yet it reveals the grief which the rich can thoughtlessly inflict upon the poor.

And the Hollises are careless. Mr. Hollis puts the rabbits into an old, unoccupied poultry house. After giving his children a lecture on the responsibilities of pet ownership, Paul Hollis forgets the animals entirely. His thoughts are taken up with getting Kasiak to help him scythe

the high pasture on the following day.

Between the two--"the hired man and the vacationist"--there is the "tacit bond of people who happen to be working together"(CS 96). But, in truth, Kasiak is a mystery to Hollis, and Cheever underlines the distance between the two by maintaining the perspective of an onlooker as he describes Kasiak who seems to Hollis a strange but "persevering and colorful figure on their landscape:"

> He dressed his deaf wife in salt bags and potato sacks. He was miserly. He was bitter. Even on that summer morning, he cut a figure of chagrin and discontent. He kept his woods clear and stored his hay at precisely the right moment, and his fields, his gardens, his compost heap, and the sour smell of milk in his immaculate kitchen conveyed the sense of intelligent husbandry. He mowed, he walked, like a prisoner in a prison yard. From the time he went to the barn an hour before dawn, until an hour before his day ended, there was no hesitation in his thought or in his step, and this flawless link of chores was part of a larger chain of responsibilities and aspirations that had begun with his youth in

> Russia and that would end, he believed, with the birth of a just and peaceable world delivered in bloodshed and arson. (97)

The Hollis family represents all that Kasiak disdains: they are bourgeois, frivolous, and effortlessly wealthy. To Hollis, the work of scything is no more than sport, while for Kasiak it means subsistence.

On a rainy evening of the summer weekend, when the Hollises have gone inside after dinner to drink brandy and cointreau, Kasiak comes to the door. Immediately, Paul Hollis decides to offer the stolid Russian a drink: "He would settle him in the wing chair and play out that charade of equality between vacationist and hired man that is one of the principal illusions of the leafy months" (101). But when Kasiak makes it clear that the purpose of his visit is only to leave a Communist newspaper for the family's edification, Hollis changes his mind.

"Is that all you want?" Hollis asks, and without further pleasantries, the two make plans to meet at six the following morning to finish mowing the high meadow which Hollis has named "Elysian."

After their slow, hard work is finished, Hollis asks Kasiak the name of his old farm horse who has shared their labor:

"She has no name," Kasiak said.

"I've never heard of a farm horse without a name."

"To name animals is bourgeois sentimentality," Kasiak said, and he started to drive away.

Paul laughed.

"You'll never come back!" Kasiak called over his shoulder. It was the only meanness at hand; he knew how deeply Paul loved the hill. His face was dark. "You never come back next year. You wait and see." (102)

We never learn whether Kasiak's prediction proves correct, but the bitterness between the two men becomes the source of a scene in which Paul Hollis fails himself in a strange and subtle way. On Sunday of Hollis's summer weekend, Hollis and his wife Virginia hear their children howling out in the yard. The children have gone into the poultry house and found their rabbits dead. When Hollis discovers poison crystals at the bottom of the feeding trough, he instantly assumes Kasiak's guilt. Shaking Kasiak's shoulders roughly, Paul shouts, "Did you poison the rabbits, Kasiak...? Don't you know how strong the poison is? Don't you know that the children might have got into it? Don't you know that it might have killed them?"(104)

Hollis has misjudged the situation, however, and when he returns to his kitchen, Virginia admits that she put the

poison there last summer thinking that they would never use the poultry house again and wanting to keep rats out of it.

At this point in the story, Cheever pauses. There is a time lapse. Paul Hollis's weekend as a summer farmer has come to an end, and we see him boarding the commuter train for the city:

> It is true of even the best of us that if an observer can catch us boarding a train at a way station; if he will mark our faces, stripped by anxiety of their self-possession; if he will appraise our luggage, our clothing, and look out of the window to see who has driven us to the station; if he will listen to the harsh or tender things we say if we are with our families....if he can judge sensibly the self-importance, diffidence, or sadness with which we settle ourselves, he will be given a broader view of our lives than most of us would intend.
>
> Paul barely made the train that Sunday night. When he pulled himself up the high steps of the coach, he was short-winded. There was still some straw on his shoes from the violence in the chicken house. The drive had not completely cooled his temper, and his face was red. No harm had been done, he thought. "No harm," he said under his breath as

> he swung his suitcase onto the rack--a man of forty with signs of obsoleteness in his confused frown, a summer farmer with blistered hands, a sunburn, and lame shoulders, so visibly shaken by some recent loss of principle that it would have been noticed by a stranger across the aisle. (104-105)

Cheever was always aware--perhaps even personally afraid--of the nearly unnoticable moment in which we lose a part of our finer selves. Those passages in his stories in which he hovers over his characters, commenting upon them with no disguise either of his presence as author or of the sorrow and sympathy in his perception stand out with jewel-like clarity. It is as if Cheever understood Martin Buber's realization that our moral measure is taken in the sudden brief moments which come unannounced into all of our lives and then pass, leaving the individual with a secret, often terrible knowledge of his own failure.

The same antagonism between "summer people" and the servants who stay through icy winters to maintain the property of the privileged becomes the central conflict in Cheever's excellent early story, "The Common Day." (The Stories of John Cheever CS 22) The owners of the estate in New Hampshire have held the land for years; during this time, there have been the usual number of divorces and petty disagreements in the

family, yet through all of it Mrs. Garrison, the matriarch, has maintained the inflexible regime and attitude of the upper class. During her summer days, she cuts flowers in the early morning, and drinks cocktails on the terrace with her children and grandchildren as the sun sets. The hired man is a Swede named Nils, whom Mrs. Garrison orders about with magisterial nonchalance. Finally, one night, Nils crosses the garden, and comes up to the terrace, his face distorted by rage:

> Mrs. Garrison arranged a steamer rug over her legs and looked narrowly at the lake and the mountains. The noise of footsteps on the gravel drive alarmed her. Guests? She turned and saw that it was Nils Lund. He left the driveway for the lawn and came across the grass toward the terrace, shuffling in shoes that were too big for him....It was as if Nils's growth, his spirit, had been stopped in some summer of his youth, but he moved warily and without spirit, like a broken-hearted old man. He came to the foot of the terrace and spoke to Mrs. Garrison without looking at her. "I no move the lilies, Mrs. Garrison."
>
> "What, Nils?" she asked, and leaned forward.
>
> "I no move the lillies."
>
> "Why not?"
>
> "I got too much to do." He looked at her and spoke

angrily. "All winter I'm here alone. There's snow up to my neck. The wind screams so, I can't sleep. I work for you seventeen years and you never been here once in the bad weather....Move the lilies, move the roses. Cut the grass. Every day you want something different. Why is it? Why are you better than me? You don't know how to do anything but kill flowers. I grow the flowers. You kill them. If a fuse burns out, you don't know how to do it. If something leaks, you don't know how to do it. You kill flowers. That's all you know how to do. For seventeen years I wait for you all winter," he shouted."You write me,'Is it warm? Are the flowers pretty?' Then you come. You sit here. You drink. God damn you people....(31)

Although Cheever understood the rage of those whom the rich used to sustain their way of life, he was also drawn to the ceremonies of wealth, the beauty of days spent sailing in clear lakes, and evenings with a roaring fire in the fireplace and a backgammon game going in which members of the family and their guests gambled for quarters as they sipped after dinner liqueurs. To accuse Cheever of being beguiled by wealth is fair enough. Yet, there is something in his attraction not entirely unworthy, an awareness which emerges in his fiction

of the fragility and frequently the peculiar charm of those who find themselves unable to "make an advantageous adjustment" to more stringent times.

In one of his lesser known but engaging stories called "Just One More Time," (The Brigadier and the Golf Widow 1964), Cheever lightheartedly portrays Alfreda and Bob Beer as the sort of people we all know, "the shoestring aristocrats of the Upper East Side--the elegant, charming, and shabby men who work for brokerage houses, and their high-flown wives, with their thrift-shop minks and their ash-can fur pieces, their alligator shoes...their gold jewelry and their dregs of Je Reviens and Chanel" (CS 248). Both Alfreda's and Bob's fathers had lost millions of dollars and their apartment is filled with the dusty residue of former wealth: "sailing trophies, autographed photographs of President Hoover, Spanish furniture and other relics of the golden age"(CS 248). Alfreda Beer is a good looking woman with "that New England fairness that seems to state a tenuous racial claim to privilege" (CS 248).

Despite the fact that they are always broke, and that Alfreda has to work at stores such as Steuben and Bendels, they cling to their position among the "diehards, the hangers-on....the shoestring aristocrats of the upper East Side" (CS 248). Their world revolves around the elegant resorts and the cocktail parties they frequent where they are forever looking for somebody notable. Although they are in constant

motion, they never change. With a deft touch, Cheever notes the odd ubiquitousness of the Beers:

> They were the kind of people you met continually at railroad stations and cocktail parties. I mean Sunday-night railroad stations; weekend and season's-end places like the junction at Hyannis or Flemington....or, to go farther afield, places like Paddington Station, Rome and the Antwerp night boat. "Hello! hello! they called across the crowd of travelers, and there he would be, in his white raincoat, with his stick and his Homburg, and there she was, in her mink or her ash-can fur piece. (CS 249)

Pressed by financial necessity, the Beers have occasionally been forced to do some "unsavory things" in the past which would temporarily jeopardize their social as well as economic status, "but they continued to operate on a margin of charm and expectation," forever in search of "a world that they understood" (CS 250). Their luck changes when a distant aunt dies, leaving them all her wealth. "Aunt Margaret has departed this life," Alfreda jubilantly tells the narrator, "and we're loaded again" (CS 250).

Glad for their good fortune, but dubious regarding their

ability to hold onto cash, the narrator occasionally thinks about the Beers, wondering whether they have prospered or declined.

Taking a somewhat risky chance, Cheever comes forward at this point in the story to comment in his own voice as the writer of the tale: "I wish I could say that leaving the theatre one snowy evening, I saw Alfreda selling pencils on Forty-sixth Street and that she would return to some basement on the West Side where Bob lay dying on a pallet, but this would only reflect on the poverty of my imagination" (CS 250).

Instead, the author openly allows the reader to watch as he invents a better ending. In this resolution, the narrator is with his family in a small town in Maine. When they rent a faulty sailboat from a drunken old man and then find themselves in dire trouble miles away from the shore, they once again, with the same magical inevitability, meet the Beers. Cresting over a wave in their spiffy cabin cruiser, the Beers are only too happy to rescue the narrator and his family. The Beers have done well for themselves. They have invested Aunt Margaret's money--as well as two legacies from Aunt Laura and Uncle Ralph--in the market, and everything has tripled in value. So they are delighted to offer Martinis on their boat, and then the warmth and luxury of their seaside villa; their generosity is as natural and exuberant as was their youthful certainty that they would one day delight in

the style of life for which they were created.

The story is no more than a light piece of froth, yet it has an essential good-heartedness about it derived from Cheever's affection for the Beers, their wacky, outmoded sense of style, and their generosity in good times which nicely redeems any marginal financial transactions they may have consented to while struggling in genteel shabbiness. There is a certain humor and winning innocence about their frank delight in money and all the pleasures it can buy.

The story has a pleasing charm, for although the narrator sees the Beers for what they are, he views them gently as creatures who are simply trying to live in the only world they understand. And the devices which Cheever uses so effortlessly in the spinning of the tale are as apparent and light-hearted as the Beers themselves. With the bravura of a natural story-teller, he endows the Beers with a measure of the supernatural that allows them to appear whenever they are needed:

> In saying that the Beers were the kind of people you met at railroad stations and cocktail parties, I overlooked the beaches. They were very aquatic. You know how it is. In the summer months, the northeastern coast up from Long Island and deep into Maine, including all the sea islands, seems to be transformed into a vast social clearinghouse, and as you sit

> on the sand listening to the heavy furniture of the North Atlantic, figures from your social past appear in the surf, as thick as raisins in a cake. A wave takes form, accelerates its ride over the shallows, boils, and breaks, revealing Consuelo Roosevelt and Mr. and Mrs. Dundas Vanderbilt, with the children of both marriages. Then a wave comes in from the right like a cavalry charge, bearing landward on the rubber raft Lathrope Macy with Emerson Crane's second wife, and the Bishop of Pittsburgh in an inner tube. Then a wave breaks at your feet with the noise of a slammed trunk lid and there are the Beers. "How nice to see you, how very nice to see you...." (CS 251)

There is a surety and deftness in Cheever's vision of the Beers washing in on a wave with all the other inhabitants of their lost world, and a perceptiveness in the way Cheever sees them as habitues of train stations, depots, piers, and cocktail parties, for at all of these places people are waiting expectantly for a new connection.

The narrative risks that Cheever takes become as much a pleasure of the story as the comic triumph of the Beers, for the fictional devices mirror the shallowness, the romance, and the fragility of life in the 1920's among the wealthy and the hangers-on. The story is essentially plotless: the only thing

that really happens is that the Beers inherit wealth. But, the humor of the fantasy, the acknowledged delight in the Beers' good-hearted vacuousness reveal Cheever's reluctant fondness for a world which has all but disappeared.

This same ambivalence appears in an exquisite early story of Cheever's which has never been included in any of the collected volumes of his stories. "In the Beginning" (The New Yorker, 6 Nov. 1937) is told by "John Cheever" as the first person narrator.

Cheever recalls a teacher of ballroom dancing named Miss Barlow. There is a mysterious agelessness about Miss Barlow, and she inhabits "a world as fugitive and strange to us then as the world of a burlesque girl or a traveller would have been" (61). She is the empress of "a small-city world of patent-leather pumps and white kid gloves, and great sorrow and great happiness, and of a nauseating sense of loss that you sometimes experienced while you were waltzing around the floor on the sunny afternoons of October, watching the wind shake down the first leaves ..." (62). Miss Barlow is in her last years by the time John Cheever enters her classes, yet she still directs the classes and assemblies in her "long, black jet-covered dresses" (62). Somewhat worldly and impersonal, she runs her dancing school with the strictest decorum: the boys are required to escort the girls into the ballroom, and the dress code is rigorous. At the age of

fifteen, Cheever graduates into Miss Barlow's Junior Assemblies held at the local country club, and he can recall, even so many years later, the peculiar distrust and scorn with which Miss Barlow viewed her adolescent students:

> I can still see her standing at the head of the line, looking down on us scornfully, as if we represented the whole gaudy and drunken decline of manners that had passed before her old eyes. (62)

By the time of the Senior Assemblies, "which were formal and began at nine and ended at one," Cheever is aware that the split between Miss Barlow's world and the world beyond impends some sort of tragedy for the old lady. The stock market has crashed, two men from the neighborhood have committed suicide because of financial losses, and there are a lot of divorces. But Miss Barlow remains unchanged:

> She wore the same dresses and the same shoes. They were the strangest shoes I have ever seen. They came as high as the ankle and they were covered with beads, and the heels spread out at the bottom like a wineglass. She walked as if they caused her great pain. In her left hand, she carried a corsage. In her right hand, she held an ebony whistle. Her face was very pale and nearer to death than life. (63)

One night, the young people enter her ballroom to find it gaily decorated with balloons. Immediately, they begin to break the balloons with matches and penknives. In shocked dismay, Miss Barlow blows her ebony whistle to restore order. But the wanton destruction she witnesses takes on a horror for her, becomes a microcosm of the world she has lived in that is now breaking up:

> "This is extraordinary," she called. "This is extraordinary. I can't understand you young people." For a moment her voice seemed to be coming from as close to her bewildered heart as I had ever heard it. But she quickly resumed her haughty, theatrical manner. "These balloons are for decoration, not for destruction. I have decorated my ballroom for many years, but this is the first time, I think, that my guests have ever taken so much pleasure in destroying the decorations. Your amusement is really a revelation, really a revelation." (63)

Some nights afterward, John Cheever dreams that Miss Barlow dies, and when a week later he finds that his dream has come true, he thinks with guilt and admiration of the old woman and her outmoded but strangely heroic adherence to a code of politesse that the world has smashed:

> And I think about Miss Barlow, with her corsage and her whistle, and about the dance music that was popular then, and about the smell of the locker room and the black elms and the mansard roofs, and that whole world that has become as fugitive and strange as the itinerant world she moved in seemed to us in the beginning. (64)

Miss Barlow has a certain pathos and dignity because her gauzy world of cotillions and corsages is crushed by American commerce in its cycles of boom and bust. Yet the narrator-- who is openly Cheever himself-- realizes that Miss Barlow is a somewhat domineering old lady, possibly even sadistic and certainly trivial. He is aware that in all probability no one else but he feels the need to dwell on the meaning of her life and death. Yet for Cheever, Miss Barlow represents the type of old lady for whom he felt a pained affection. In many ways, Miss Barlow is like Honora Wapshot and a distant relative of Cheever's who becomes the main character in one of his late stories called "Percy." (The World of Apples 1968). These women are eccentric and asexual; they are sternly committed to an aesthetic and moral code which is rigid and quirky, yet somehow touching in its innocence. They are capable of riding roughshod over individuals in their own determination to live as they choose. What Cheever admires is their certainty about

who they are, and their willingness to hold out against the tide of social change.

"Percy" is also a record of the ambivalent feeling Cheever would have all his life regarding a proper relation to the past. While he admired those who maintained an outmoded way of life so tenaciously that their inability to change often led to their death, he also despised those who used the past for commerce or as a prop to social snobbery.

In one of his early uncollected stories, "Publick House," (The New Yorker, 16 Aug. 1941) a widow with a weakness for "enthusiasms," changes the old Briggs house into a historic tearoom and tavern. She places a sign at the edge of the flagstone path that leads to the front door which says "Publick House, 1750," and she decorates the yard with a spinning wheel. Her efforts are successful; the inn is popular with ladies who love to hear Mrs. Briggs tell them in greeting that "Lafayette rode over that lawn...Julie Briggs was expecting a child and so she decided to name her child Lafayette. It was a girl, so she named her Sofiette..." (46). But, in her zeal, Mrs. Briggs not only falsifies the past--she has named one tree the Peace Tree because supposedly some Indians once smoked a peace pipe beneath it-- but she also sells it away without regard for the needs of her own family. Hungry and exhausted with waiting until the ladies who have come to luncheon at the inn are finally finished, Mrs.

Briggs's father suddenly protests:

> "Well, I won't wait. I have some rights around here and I'm going to exercise them. I'm sick of these goddamned tearoom people and I'm sick of this god-damned tearoom food...You've sold all my things. You've sold my mother's china. You sold the rugs. You sold the portraits. You've made a business out of it--selling the past. What kind of business is that--selling the past? (48)

Yet, Cheever felt equal contempt for those who constructed their identities out of an illusory relation to the past. He was very much in the Emersonian tradition of rebellion against any spiritual dependence upon old ways of thought or habits of being.

Whereas Emerson could write, "Our age is retrospective...Let us demand our own works and laws and worship," Cheever made it a part of his flamboyant persona that he never even preserved the manuscripts of his own completed stories. And in one of his later stories, "The Lowboy" (Some People, Place and Things that will Not Appear in my Next Novel, 1961), a younger brother who has little identity of his own, becomes fixated upon possessing a museum quality lowboy which has come down to the two brothers when

an aunt suddenly dies. The story is both serious, and comic. The older brother watches Richard's obsession with amusement and repulsion.

When the lowboy is finally installed in Richard's house to his finicky satisfaction--he even purchases a rug resembling the rug that had stood under the lowboy in their boyhood home and a silver pitcher exactly like the one which was placed on the lowboy and kept filled with flowers of the season--something unaccountable begins to happen to Richard and his family:

> At some point--perhaps when he purchased the silver pitcher--Richard committed himself to the horrors of the past, and his life, like so much else in his nature, took the form of an arc. There must have been some felicity, some clearness in his feeling for Wilma, but once the lowboy took a commanding position in his house, he seemed driven back upon his wretched childhood. We went there for dinner--it must have been Thanksgiving. The lowboy stood in the dining room, on its carpet of mysterious symbols, and the silver pitcher was full of chrysanthemums. Richard spoke to his wife and children in a tone of vexation that I had forgotten. He quarreled with everyone; he even

quarreled with my children.... (CS 411)

When the narrator reaches his own house, he takes wild preventive measures that the past will not exert the same detrimental hold on his own family:

> When we got home, I took the green glass epergne that belonged to Aunt Mildred off the sideboard and smashed it with a hammer. Then I dumped Grandmother's sewing box into the ash can, burned a big hole in her lace tablecloth, and buried her pewter in the garden. Out they go--the Roman coins, the sea horse from Venice, and the Chinese fan. We can cherish nothing less than our random understanding of death and the earth-shaking love that draws us to one another. Down with the stuffed owl in the upstairs hall and the statue of Hermes on the newel post! Hock the ruby necklace, throw away the invitation to Buckingham Palace, jump up and down on the perfume atomizer from Murano and the Canton fish plates. Dismiss whatever molests us and challenges our purpose, sleeping or waking. Cleanliness and valor will be our watchwords. Nothing less will get us past the armed sentry and over the

mountainous border. (CS 412)

The casual use of magic, of objects or people or houses taking on strange powers of destruction was there from the beginning in Cheever's work. He seems always to have been drawn to the surreal, and then--in a reaction perhaps of caution--to have pulled back towards a realism which became the style readers associated with his name. Yet, in story after story, in every period of Cheever's work, one encounters his fascination with the powers of darkness. "Torch Song," a story he wrote in 1947 (The Enormous Room) reformulates the classic theme of the ghost tale: that there are women who thrive on death, who pair up briefly with strange and vulnerable men only to lead them into the next life. Although "Torch Song" never received much critical attention, it has an eerie power and it is strangely reminiscent of Chekov's story, "The Darling." Cheever develops the plot by using an involved onlooker as narrator, a young man named Jack Lorey who has shared a past in the midwest with the woman he comes to think of as "the Widow:"

> After Jack Lorey had known Joan Harris in New York for a few years, he began to think of her as the Widow. She always wore black, and he was always

> given the feeling, by a curious disorder in her apartment, that the undertakers had just left. This impression did not stem from malice on his part, for he was fond of Joan. They came from the same city in Ohio and had reached New York at about the same time in the middle thirties. They were the same age, and during their first summer in the city they used to meet after work and drink Martinis in places like the Brevoort and Charles' and have dinner and play checkers at the Lafayette. (CS 89)

Like so many young women from the midwest, Joan first tries to work as a model in New York, but ends up as a hostess at Longchamps. The names of the places Cheever uses-- restaurants, and cocktail lounges such as Longchamps and the Brevoort-- breathe the essence of an older, more elegant and romantic city that has disappeared. Consequently, endings and the resistless passing of manners, places, and people are everywhere in the story. Yet Cheever wisely avoids any obvious connection of Joan Harris with the death that she seems to bring to everything she touches. She is no pale and ghostly harbinger, but rather a darkly attractive young woman who conveys only a healthy pleasure in the heady world of New York which she inhabits.

Although Jack becomes absorbed in his own complex life in the city, he sees Joan occasionally, and each time, he finds her in oddly desperate dilemmas. The strategy with which Cheever maintains the sense that Joan is both real and yet ghostly is skillful, for Jack is always catching glimpses of her at a crowded party or from an escalator or through the window of a train which has carried summer passengers back from the country:

> He was returning to New York with his girl one Sunday night on the Lehigh line. It was one of those trains that move slowly across the face of New Jersey, bringing back to the city hundreds of people, like the victims of an immense and strenuous picnic, whose faces are blazing and whose muscles are lame.... When the train stopped in Pennsylvania Station, they moved with the crowd along the platform, toward the escalator. As they were passing the wide, lighted windows of the diner, Jack turned his head and saw Joan. It was the first time he had seen her since Thanksgiving or Christmas. He couldn't remember.
>
> Joan was with a man who had obviously passed out. His head was in his arms on the table, and an overturned highball glass was near one of his

> elbows. Joan was shaking his shoulders gently and speaking to him. She seemed to be vaguely troubled, vaguely amused....It troubled Jack to see in these straits a girl who reminded him of the trees and lawns of his home town, but there was nothing he could do to help. Joan continued to shake the man's shoulders, and the crowd pressed Jack past one after another of the diner's windows, past the malodorous kitchen, and up the escalator. (CS 90)

As the story progresses, both Jack's and Joan's lives become more and more complex. Jack goes through a marriage and divorce while Joan seems to become involved with one bizarre man after another. And while the ending of an affair with Joan often leaves her in a state of temporary exhaustion or financial distress, it invariably means more serious consequences for Joan's lovers:

> In the darkness, Joan began to talk about her departed lovers, and from what she said Jack gathered that they had all had a hard time. Nils, the suspect count, was dead. Hugh Bascomb, the drunk, had joined the Merchant Marine and was missing in the North Atlantic. Franz, the German, had taken poison the night the Nazis bombed Warsaw.

> "We listened to the news on the radio," Joan said, "and then he went back to his hotel and took poison. The maid found him dead in the bathroom the next morning." (CS 98)

Eventually, of course, Jack, too, finds himself in hard times, living in a furnished room on the West Side, jobless, and ill. With uncanny ability, Joan searches him out, comes to him dressed in black and bringing Scotch. The softness of her voice, and the contentment she seems to find in nursing him make Jack uneasy; he realizes suddenly that Joan finds a macabre satisfaction in attending the dying. With his last strength he rouses himself, sends Joan away, and clears the room of all traces of his presence:

> He emptied the ashtray containing his nail parings and cigarette butts into the toilet, and swept the floor with a shirt, so that there would be no trace of his life, of his body, when that lewd and searching shape of death came there to find him in the evening. (CS 102)

Even from the earliest period of Cheever's work, there is a surrender to the surreal tale, an awareness that some of his delight in story-telling would require him occasionally

to burst through the boundaries of a consistently realistic style. It was part of Cheever's dual vision of life that he could entertain a fascination with the darkly magical even as he wrote the stories such as "Christmas is a Sad Season for the Poor" (1949) and "Clancy in the Tower of Babel" (1950) which humorously depict the troubles of the superintendents and elevator operators who live in physical proximity and spiritual distance from the tenants who occupy the elegant buildings of the upper east side. Cheever was both the debonair man of the city who was beguiled by a New York that was "still filled with a river light, when you heard the Benny Goodman quartets from a radio in the corner stationary store, and when almost everybody wore a hat" (Preface to the Collected Stories ix) and a fearful man who had to grapple with his dread of urban life. He was frightened by the bridges, by the sense of enclosure, and by the perception he could not seem to escape that the urban reality of strangers living so closely to each other in narrow streets and tall buildings would somehow encourage individual sorrows and sins to become infectious and ultimately poisoning.

It is this perception that is at the heart of "The Enormous Radio" (1947), for when Jim Westcott purchases the immense and ugly radio as a gift for his wife Irene, they find that as soon as they turn it on and see "the dials flooded with a malevolent green light" (CS 34) it brings them not the

classical music they adore, but rather the sordid and secret realities of the lives going on in their seemingly pleasant and well ordered building.

At first, Irene delights in these revelations, but gradually the "powerful and ugly instrument, with its mistaken sensitivity to discord" begins to change the quality of her own life. She begins to drink more and to squabble with Jim; by the story's conclusion, the radio has transformed their marriage into a liaison as vicious as those in most of the apartments in their building. Jim begins to find Irene's obsessive fascination with the nasty details the radio transmits a tiresome and depressing bore while Irene becomes ever more importunate in her need for reassurance from him that they are not like all the other unhappy couples.

When Irene moans, "Life is too terrible, too sordid and awful. But we've never been like that, have we darling?" (CS 40), he reminds her cruelly of the time she stole her mother's jewelry before the will was probated, and the time she refused to give her sister a cent of the money that was intended for her, and the time that she made a neighbor's life hellish by some sort of gossip she circulated. In a final thrust of cruelty, Jim shouts, "And where was all your piety and your virtue when you went to that abortionist? I'll never forget how cool you were. You packed your bag and went off to have that child murdered as if you were going to Nassau. If you'd

had any reasons, if you'd had any good reasons--" (CS 41)

Just as Young Goodman Brown's understanding of his own nature is altered after his night in the forest, Irene Westcott cannot preserve the illusion of her innocence against the force of the radio.[1] Slowly, the transgressions of her prior life begin to invade the present, corrupting her marriage and darkening her vision of life.

Standing among her possessions "like an aggressive intruder"(CS 34), the radio becomes a mechanical embodiment of evil, a modern version of Hawthorne's "elder person." As it initiates Irene Westcott into an urban form of diabolic communion with her race, the enormous radio takes Cheever himself one step further into the world of the surreal and the grotesque.

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[1] Henrietta Ten Harmsel has noted the thematic similarity of the two stories in her article, "'Young Goodman Brown' and 'The Enormous Radio'" Studies in Short Fiction: 9. 1972, pp. 407-408.

Chapter Four

Expelled: The Wapshot Novels

The Wapshot novels are strangely unlike the fiction Cheever produced both earlier and later in his career. Where the short stories are set in intensely familiar locales, the settings of the Wapshot novels are either drenched with nostalgia or surreal in waste-land sterility. Tightly plotted, the short stories are structured according to Edgar Allan Poe's traditional doctrines of brevity and unity of impression. In contrast, The Wapshot Chronicle (1957) and The Wapshot Scandal (1964) are sprawling productions crammed with a vast number of minor characters who figure in one or two episodes and then are never seen again. The plots seem sporadically to lose themselves in thickets of irrelevent incident, and within the two novels there are an astonishing assortment of fictional genres: pastoral romance, chivalric quest, Gothic adventure, social realism, and futuristic satire.

Structured around the Wapshot family's dissolution and the slow decline of St. Botolph's, the town in which the family has lived for generations, the novels trace a long spiral of descent. The deaths of the older generation of Wapshots, the separate misfortunes of their children, and the transformation of St. Botolph's from a once vital

Massachusetts seaport to a town subsisting on minor industry and tourist traffic, are the demarcations within the two novels that mark the inexorable process of decline.

Remembering the period during which he was writing The Wapshot Scandal, Cheever told Christopher Lehmann-Haupt: "After the Scandal I was really in trouble, really suicidal" (tape recording of Christopher Lehmann-Haupt interview with Cheever, February 1969, qtd. in Donaldson 201). Although his personal difficulties were growing more urgent, Cheever preferred to project the cause for his acute depression on the external environment. Writing in the middle of the 1950's, he attempted to define his sense that despite the promise with which the decade had begun, something had gone "terribly wrong. The most useful image I have...is of a man in a quagmire looking into a tear in the sky. I am not speaking here of despair, but of confusion. I fully expected the trout streams of my youth to fill up with beer cans and the meadows to be covered with houses; I may even have expected to be separated from most of my moral and ethical heritage; but the forceful absurdities of life today find me unprepared. Something has gone very wrong and I do not have the language, the imagery, or the concepts to describe my apprehensions" (Burhans in Critical Essays 109).

With the evidence of our modern determination to obliterate nature growing steadily more ominous, Cheever

turned, perhaps unconsciously, to the tradition of pastoral romance as a way of dramatizing his concern. St. Botolphs becomes his vision of Arcadia, the green and leafy haven of our collective imagination. Set in a valley enclosed by hills to the west and ocean to the east, St. Botolphs is, for one last enchanted moment, still safe from the disruptions of modernity.

Beyond the protected town, however, lie the cities, suburbs, and bleak military outposts that will form the combined force of opposition to the values represented by St. Botolphs. The contest is set in terms of machine against garden, computer against poetry, psychology against sacrament. As such, the Wapshot novels become what Alfred Kazin calls "allegories of place" ("O'Hara, Cheever, and Updike," Critical Essays 122) structured more through contrasting metaphors of environment than through continuity of plot.

The source of the plot which twists through The Wapshot Chronicle and The Wapshot Scandal is the ancient story motif of a young man sent into an alien world to seek his fortune. Moses and Coverly, the two sons of Leander and Sarah Wapshot, are required by the terms of their aged and eccentric cousin Honora's will to marry and become the fathers of sons before they can inherit the Wapshot wealth.

In the course of The Wapshot Chronicle, Moses goes to Washington, D.C., works briefly in the government, loses his

security clearance as a result of a clandestine love affair, and becomes a bond salesman in New York City. In speedy succession, he meets Melissa Scaddon, falls in love, and resolves to win Melissa for his wife. His pursuit takes him to Clear Haven, a Gothic castle near New York, where he wins Melissa from the control of her legal guardian, Justina Wapshot Molesworth Scaddon, a distant Wapshot relative and an evil, man-hating, witch-like old woman. In a strange version of Gothic fiction, Cheever details the lurid horrors of the haunted castle and completes the courtship episode with Moses rescuing Melissa from the fiery inferno of Clear Haven as it bursts into flame against the dark night sky.

Moses' heroic triumph is short-lived, however, for when he takes Melissa to live in the suburb of Proxmire Manor she quickly becomes so desperately bored that she begins a love affair with the local grocery boy. After he learns of Melissa's infidelity, Moses becomes first a depressive and then a drunk. But since he and Melissa have managed to produce a male heir, Moses has fulfilled the terms of his cousin Honora's quirky will and so inherits his half of the Wapshot fortune.

Coverly's journey toward fatherhood and the gaining of his legacy is equally unconventional. In New York, Coverly learns by chance of the opportunities available to trained tapers, men who are able to translate the symbols of physics

into computer code. While attending the McIlhenny Institute at government expense, he meets Betsey MacCaffery, a waitress at a coffee shop who has had a history of mental disorder.

Betsey's frailty is no barrier to Coverly's experience of love. But, when they marry and move to Remsen Park, an army base somewhat like a nightmare Levitttown of four thousand identical houses in which neighbors start fist fights over the possession of rubber garbage pails and all the evening sounds are mechanized, the environment precipitates the first of Betsey's breakdowns. Although Coverly becomes more an attendant to Betsey than a husband, their sexual relationship is still a solace and when Betsey gives birth to a son, Coverly becomes co-inheritor of Honora's legacy.

Although Moses and Coverly leave St. Botolphs together with the same quest to complete, they pursue their adventures separately and are never again, throughout the course of the two novels, in close or continuous contact.

There is a loneliness implicit in the Wapshot novels, the particular loneliness of the New England Protestant family trapped in a density of ambivalent feeling it can neither express nor endure. Contained in habitual reserve, the individual members of the Wapshot family are brought forward one by one, as if the borders of each chapter represent the clear lines of separation in their private lives. As lonely and full of secret, unpredictable resentments as the citizens

of Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio, the Wapshots are still secure in the role they play in St. Botolphs as the town's first family. It is this strange duplicitousness that pervades the two novels as a whole, for even as Cheever writes about the family members in terms of endearment, he creates, simultaneously, a shadow to their individual psyches that works, almost against his intention, to pull them from their assigned roles as the traditional figures of rectitude, reverence, and unfettered individualism in this New England pastoral romance.

Honora Wapshot, the family matriarch, seems on surface a beneficent if slightly batty old maid. Hurling her mail unopened into the blazing hearth, or sending the local bus company an annual check rather than submit to the annoyance of paying her fare, Cousin Honora's eccentricities are implicity equated with delightful disrespect for authority and the inherently American individualism that Cheever would honor. But, beneath Honora's amusing idiosyncracies, there is a troubling willfulness that remains unacknowledged within the two novels, a self absorption that leaves her emotionally insensitive to the exterior world. This incapacity becomes a danger both to herself and to the surrounding family, for Honora has been left sole trustee of the Wapshot wealth.

It is upon Leander Wapshot, Honora's cousin and the father of Moses and Coverly, that the effects of Honora's

inability to perceive the needs of others fall most heavily. For, like many heroes of pastoral, Leander is unworldly and improvident with money. He is content in his advancing years to dream away his days as captain of the S.S. Topaze, a ferry boat Honora has purchased for him that runs between St. Botolphs and Narragansett, a tourist town across the bay. When the Topaze smashes into a rock during an off-shore squall, its destruction signals the beginning of Leander's crisis. Honora refuses, with characteristic unconcern, to come forward with the money needed to repair the boat. Instead, she watches passively as Sarah Wapshot, Leander's ingenious wife, determines to transform the Topaze into "the only floating gift shoppe in New England" (Wapshot Chronicle 158).

At this point in the Chronicle, Cheever is in a double bind. To preserve the unity of his novel, he must maintain the tone he has established of gentle romantic comedy. In this vein, he details Sarah's childlike delight in the hideous gewgaws that overflow the tables and shelves of her store: hand-painted drinking glasses, vases, embroidery, and cigarette boxes that play "Tales from the Vienna Woods" when they are opened. Even Leander's misery as he contemplates the Topaze now filled with the women who have come to celebrate the opening of the shop is handled with a gauzy humor that only narrowly misses turning Leander into an object of

pitiable ridicule:

> The taste of alum in the rind of a grape, the smell of the sea, the heat of the spring sun, berries bitter and sweet, a grain of sand in his teeth--all of that which he meant by life seemed taken away from him. Where were the serene twilights of his old age? He would have liked to pluck out his eyes. Watching the candlelight on his ship--he had brought her home through gales and tempests--he felt ghostly and emasculated. Then he went to his bureau drawer and took from under the dried rose and wreath of hair his loaded pistol. The fires of the day were burning out like a conflagration in some industrial city and above the barn cupola he saw the evening star as sweet and round as a human tear. He fired his pistol out of the window and then fell down on the floor. (Wapshot Chronicle 164)

Within the comedy of Leander's disgruntlement, there is another force at work, a darker vision and genuine anxiety that refuses to be completely alleviated despite the deftness with which Cheever tries to delude the reader--and perhaps himself--that nothing here is to be taken too seriously. For

Leander knows that the transformation of the S.S. Topaze from a seaworthy vessel into a gimmicky tourist attraction is a sign of all the other changes which will rob St.Botolphs of its authenticity. With the awareness of his own age pressing heavily upon him and a sense of his uselessness in this new world of commercial fakery, Leander simply swims into the sea he has always loved and disappears:

> On Monday morning at about eleven the wind came out of the east and Leander hurriedly got together his binoculars and bathing trunks and made himself a sandwich and took the Travertine bus to the beach... He waded out to his knees and wetted his wrists and forehead to prepare his circulation for the shock of cold water and thus avoid a heart attack. At a distance he seemed to be crossing himself. Then he began to swim--a sidestroke with his face half in the water, throwing his right arm up like the spar of a windmill--and he was never seen again. (Wapshot Chronicle 245)

Leander's death closes The Wapshot Chronicle. His passing signals the end of a way of life for the Wapshots and the quickening of St. Botolphs' decline. In the opening section of The Wapshot Scandal, St. Botolphs has already

become more vulnerable to the transience and sporadic violence that Cheever associates with the world beyond.

The narrator of The Wapshot Scandal, a strangely invisible yet personal voice in the novel, guides the reader through St. Botolphs on Christmas Eve. As in days of old, the festival is ushered in with merriment and a sense of reverence. Families decorate their trees and carolers go from house to house. But, in the midst of all this, a woman, alone and a stranger in town, makes a call from the drugstore to her mother in New Jersey. The girl's loneliness is, to Cheever, "a prophecy of gas stations and motels, freeways and all-night supermarkets" (The Wapshot Scandal 9) , the symbols of the mass culture of anonymity which lie at the heart of Cheever's dread.

The disrespect for natural beauty which the new highway architecture represents has, by the beginning of The Wapshot Scandal, altered the outlook of even long-term residents of St. Botolphs. On Christmas Eve, an old man carries a sack of kittens to the West River. While trying to drown them, he slips into the icy water and disappears. St. Botolphs has already become less safe for the weak and unwanted, less hospitable to a stranger at the gate. And the old people--the people who lived in harmony with nature and tolerated eccentrics of all kinds within the community--are dying out.

The only major character from the older generation still

plot line in which Honora becomes so enmeshed in tax troubles that she must go abroad to escape penalties. When the Internal Revenue Service agent turns up in Rome, Honora surrenders herself willingly to extradition. She is far too old and too much the embodiment of New England culture to have thrived on foreign soil. Informed that all her property will be confiscated, Honora simply determines to starve herself to death in the familiar surroundings of her home in St. Botolphs. Before she dies, she sends Coverly a telegram summoning him to her side.

When he arrives, he finds her house--the fine white house on Boat Street that represents all the beauty and authenticity of the old life--garishly redecorated. Honora, however, is still herself, even in the autocratic dignity with which she chooses to die, half drunk on whisky, half listening as Coverly reads to her from The Count of Monte Cristo.

Honora's death marks the final dissolution of the Wapshot family, the end of St. Botolphs as a cohesive community. Although Moses returns for Honora's funeral, he is so continuously drunk that a manager from the local motel must call Coverly to come and get his brother.

Things no longer work. The train station is uncared for and deserted. No carolers sing on Christmas Eve as they used to, and the minister who celebrates the Christmas morning service is too drunk to remember the liturgy. With a last

look back at the town, the narrator of The Wapshot Scandal prepares to take his final leave:

> Some time after midnight there is a thunderstorm and the last I see of the village is in the light of these explosions, knowing how harshly time will bear down on this ingenuous place....I will never come back, and if I do there will be nothing left, there will be nothing left but the headstones to record what has happened; there will be nothing at all. (The Wapshot Scandal 213)

Discovered, as all fictional places are, through imaginative voyages of the author's own, St. Botolphs is, at the same time, an evocation of the South Shore towns in which Cheever grew up. Writing after his father's funeral, and transferring his memories into the less personal third person form he frequently adopted in his journals, Cheever described the landscape of a still unspoiled New England:

> He would remember with pleasure as the most beautiful part of the world the roads south of Hingham with their pollarded elms and the smell there of timothy and sweet grass in the hay and

> the salt marshes on the North River and the river itself with its strong smelling waters and even the peaceful hill at Adams as quiet as a country village with its elms and its distant church bells.... (Qtd. in Susan Cheever, Home Before Dark 9)

If Quincy and Newburyport, Wollaston and Hingham held, for Cheever, the same remembrance of paradise that they had for Henry Adams some years before, it was of a paradise fragile and short-lived. Against the background of a New England still pastoral and solacing in its beauty, the painful family situation in which Cheever was caught seemed somehow out of place and incomprehensible. The elements of the drama recur frequently in Cheever's fiction transposed into disguising variations, yet, in essence, the same: a father who suffers financial reverses that wound his pride and cause him to abandon the family; a mother who uses the father's failure as an opportunity to seize economic and emotional control of the family; a younger son who would take his father's side if the father did not seem so thoroughly to reject him in favor of an older brother. A journal entry Cheever made in the 1950's records the process in which Cheever's mind merged the images of parental abandonment, homelessness, and ultimately exile:

> He had come home from school one afternoon

> and found the furnace dead, some unwashed dishes on the table in the dining room and at the center of the table a pot of tulips that the cold had killed and blackened. The realization that anger had driven them both out of the house, that their passionate detestation of one another had blinded them to their commitments to the house and to him traveled crookedly up through his heart like a fissure made by an earthquake in a wall, leaving on one side innocence and trust and on the other the lingering ruefulness and gloom of an orphaned spirit. He never quite escaped the chill of that empty house, and all the symbols of exile--the lighted window on the distant farm, the watch dogs barking, the ship going out to sea, the bright views of children playing in the distance--held for him so unnatural a force that they could make it seem as if his heart had turned over. (qtd. in Susan Cheever, Home Before Dark 3-4)

This cluster of incident in Cheever's early life--loss of home, the disappearance of a father and seeming treachery of a mother--emerge as central elements in the Wapshot novels. Yet, these strands of autobiographic material which twist through so much of Cheever's writing generate in the The Wapshot Chronicle and The Wapshot Scandal a fictional style

which is a radical departure.

Burdened by a personal connection not completely worked through in the final fiction, the Wapshot novels are strangely inconsistent versions of pastoral romance in which St. Botolphs, the Edenic paradise, is lost not as a result of the machine technology which encircles it, but rather from the chill hostility with which women will emasculate their men, domesticate the landscape, and ultimately trivialize all they touch for the purposes of profit and a false prettiness. There is something almost demonic in Sarah Wapshot's will to take over her husband's boat, something less than worthy in her passion for the silly knick-knacks of Yankee culture. If Sarah and Honora and all the iron ladies of St. Botolphs are harpies who will calmly destroy their husbands' will to live, they are clever enough to conceal their true natures under a guise of virtuous, civic-minded zeal. The strange ambivalence with which Cheever draws the collective character of the Wapshot women--investing them with both the maternal ability to comfort and the equal capacity to inflict pain--is a measure of the difficulty he faced in controlling the autobiographic material at the heart of the Wapshot novels.

Determined to evade the darker reality of what he perceived as his own mother's coldness and neglect, Cheever attempts to preserve the women of St. Botolphs in the traditional literary stereotype of the redoubtable New England

matron. Yet, the truth of Cheever's feeling keeps breaking through to cause troubling inconsistencies of characterization. There is simply no hint before Sarah wrests the S.S. Topaze from Leander's control that she harbors such lethal disregard for her husband's self-esteem, no likelihood that Honora would so renounce her sense of family honor that she could passively stand by as Leander is made ridiculous.

The suppressed apprehension regarding women's power that affects Cheever's understanding of the forces threatening St. Botolphs becomes a full-fledged misogynistic vision in the section of The Wapshot Chronicle set in Clear Haven. For, Clear Haven is a transformed and transforming world in which men are punished for each of their sensual appetites, sadistically humiliated by the evil crone of the castle, Justina Wapshot Molesworth Scaddon.

Justina acts out her hatred of men by forcing Moses into the self-abasing ordeals he must undergo to win the hand of Melissa. Half starved by the small portions of institutional food Justina serves to the bizarre collection of semi-comatose guests she likes to keep about the place, Moses must crawl by night over the steep roofs of the castle to gain entrance to Melissa's room. When Justina discovers this ploy, she is so appalled that she instructs Giacomo, her faithful servant, to shoot bullets from his crow gun at Moses' cowering form. Even after Moses manages to marry Melissa, Justina arranges to have

their comfortable marriage bed replaced by "twin beds--narrow and hard as slate" (Wapshot Chronicle 212). When even these measures fail to preclude sexual pleasure, Justina simply hovers in the background with witch-like omnipotence as Melissa determines to change herself from a sex goddess of golden beauty to a life-denying hag who wears shapeless dresses and metal curlers. Melissa's incomprehensible will to destroy both her beauty and Moses' desire becomes, in Cheever's formulation, a manifestation of the mysterious powers which women can call upon to frustrate a man's fulfillment:

> Now Moses knew that women can take many forms; that it is in their power in the convulsions of love to take the shape of any beast or beauty on land or sea...and it did not dismay him that this gift for metamorphosis could be used to further all kinds of venal and petty schemes for self-aggrandizement. Moses had learned that it was wise to keep in mind the guises most often taken by the women he loved so that when a warm-hearted woman appeared suddenly...to have become a spinster he would be prepared...Now he watched the changes that had come over his golden-skinned wife, trying to discover what it was that she represented.

> She represented chastity--an infelicitous and implacable chastity. (Wapshot Chronicle 216)

As a projection of Cheever's anxiety, the Clear Haven section of The Wapshot Chronicle forms itself as a gothic fantasy which remains at odds with the sections of the novel set in more realistic locations. For, unlike the suburban community of Proxmire Manor or the two futuristic military bases to which Coverly and Betsey Wapshot are assigned, Clear Haven represents no social, environmental, or technological threat to St. Botolphs. Without clear relation to the rest of the novel, the Clear Haven setting functions as a device whereby Cheever can transform his own sexual concerns regarding women into a seemingly light-hearted parody of Gothic romance while simultaneously presenting Moses as a somewhat reduced and muddled version of a modern grail knight who must rescue his beloved from a realm of sexual disorder.

The new world into which Moses leads Melissa at the beginning of The Wapshot Scandal is the suburban community of Proxmire Manor, a green and prosperous town situated "on three leafy hills north of the city" (The Wapshot Scandal 32) where the citizens are sociable but given to gossip. It does not take long after Moses and Melissa have bought their house and hired their maid for Melissa to realize that "one could do much better than this" and to wonder why everyone "in this

most equitable world should seem so bored and disappointed" (The Wapshot Scandal 35). Within the borders of Proxmire Manor there may be swimming pools and parties, but as in all of Cheever's suburbs, the stately fixtures of wealth seem only to make the sorrows of ordinary life ever more insupportable and absurd.

In contrast to St. Botolphs, the suburban community of Proxmire Manor is most notable for its determination to eliminate "through adroit social pressures the thorny side of human nature" (The Wapshot Scandal 32). Where St. Botolphs can generously assimilate the eccentricities of inhabitants as unusual as Reba Harsnip, the fervent antivivisectionist who is dedicated to suppressing the celebration of Christmas, or Uncle Peepee Marshmallow who likes to wander naked through the village, Proxmire Manor discourages difference. When a young housewife of the suburban community, Gertrude Lockhart, gains a reputation for promiscuity, the matrons plan to hound her out of town. Before she can be expelled, however, a stranger fate overtakes Gertrude Lockhart: she becomes victim to the machines which control her suburban house and garden.

Repeatedly in both his novels and his stories, Cheever places the machine in opposition to natural, spontaneous life and then intensifies the lethal potential of mechanization by inventing parables in which characters are either done in completely or made grotesquely mechanical themselves through

the insidious powers of technology. Gertrude Lockhart finally hangs herself when her septic tank, oil burner, and electric wiring break down:

> She had some more whisky, put on some lipstick and drove to the hardware store in Parthenia where she bought a large electric heater. She plugged it into an outlet in the kitchen and pulled the switch. All the lights in the house went out and she poured herself some more whisky and began to cry. She cried for her discomforts, but she cried more bitterly for their ephemeralness, for the mysterious harm...an oil burner could do to the finest part of her spirit...; she cried for a world that seemed to be without laws and prophets...she could not educate herself in the maintenance and repair of household machinery and felt in herself that tragic obsolescence she had sensed in the unemployed of Parthenia....
> ...At four o'clock the oil burner went out of order. She was back on the telephone again. No one could come for three or four days. It was very cold outside and she watched the winter night approach the house with the horror of an aboriginal. She could feel the

> cold overtake the rooms. When it got dark she went into the garage and took her life. (The Wapshot Scandal 74)

There is an element of grotesque here in which the machines are implicated, for they have not only robbed Gertrude Lockhart of her life, but also divested her death of meaning. The very lightness and insouciance of Cheever's prose as he recounts the fable of Gertrude Lockhart underscores the grotesquerie surrounding her end. For if the tragic and the comic, the serious and the trivial are each conveyed through a similar style of anecdotal amusement, the reader can only conclude that all human events are essentially of equal insignificance.

As the appropriate expression of the perverse passion to diminish human existence by levelling physical as well as spiritual points of distinction, the new ubiquitous waste land of highway and franchise strip that encircles Proxmire Manor elicits from Cheever a prose poetry of recoil reminiscent in tone and rhythm of T.S. Eliot's earlier reaction to urban blight:

> The Moonlite Drive-In was divided into three magnificent parts. There was the golf links, the roller rink, and the vast amphitheater itself,

> where thousands of darkened cars were arranged in the form of an ancient arena, spread out beneath the tree of night. Above the deep thunder from the rink and the noise from the screen you could hear--high in the air and so like the sea that a blind man would be deceived--the noise of traffic on the great Northern Expressway that flows southward from Montreal to the Shenandoah, engorging in its clover leaves and brilliantly engineered gradings the green playing fields, rose gardens, barns, farms, meadows, trout streams, forests, homesteads and churches of a golden past. The population of this highway gathered for their meals in a string of identical restaurants, where the murals, the urinals, the menus, and the machines for vending sacred medals were uniform. (The Wapshot Scandal 78)

It is this final reduction to insignificance of basic human values such as life over death, kindness over indifference, poetry over computer print-outs that characterizes existence in Talifer and Remsen Park, the two rocket launching bases where Coverly Wapshot lives with his wife, Betsey. Set at farthest remove from St. Botolphs, the

two military communities represent Cheever's dystopic vision of a world made bleak by technology.

Technology forms the basis of the rigid class system that orders life on the two army bases. Only physicists and engineers live in houses with bomb shelters. Technical workers, considered replaceable, are left unprotected. Valued according to their occupational worth, neighbors regard each other with suspicion. When Coverly comes home one night, he is forced into combat with the man next door who has taken his garbage pail. By the light of a missile firing, they fight each other for the meagre prize.

Just as nature has been obliterated by the concrete gantries and underground silos of the missile bases, all spontaneity of fellow feeling has withered between families living in the military communities. Betsey Wapshot simply goes back to her housework after she witnesses a fatal accident in which a neighbor putting in window screens falls from a ladder. To compensate for the withering of spontaneous social impulse, the military managers are clever enough to organize weekend picnics at the lauching sites which fill a double function: the outings generate a brief cameraderie and, at the same time, give the workers and their families a shared sense of involvement in the purpose of military life:

The rocket-launching sites at Remsen Park

> were fifteen miles to the south and this presented a morale problem for there were hundreds or thousands of technicians like Coverly who knew nothing about the beginnings or ends of their works. The administration met this problem by having public rocket launchings on Saturday afternoons. Transportation was furnished so that whole families coul pack their sandwiches and beer and sit in bleachers to hear the noise of doom crack and see fire that seemed to lick at the vitals of the earth. The Wapshot Chronicle 190)

In his novel, Ceremony in Lone Tree, Wright Morris creates a scene eerily similar to Cheever's public missile launchings. Gordon Boyd, on his way from Acapulco to Lone Tree, Nebraska in his '48 Plymouth, stops at a motel near Las Vegas. Finding the motel nearly full, he asks the elderly woman who greets him whether the people have come for the gambling.

> "Gambling?" she said, as if it had skipped her mind. "Oh no, it's the bomb."
>
> The bomb? For a moment Boyd did not reply.

> In Mexico he had forgotten about the bomb.... As Boyd signed the register she added: Did he want to be up for the bomb?
>
> For the bomb? He saw that it was a routine question.
>
> Just before dawn, she replied. That was when the breeze died and they did it. When he didn't reply she said if he hadn't seen a bomb go off, he should. He owed it to himself. Terrible as it was, it was also a wonderful sight. There was this flash, then this pillar of fire went up and up like a rabbit's ear.
>
> Boyd turned as if he saw it.
>
> "You better be up for it," she said and after his name in the register she added: WAKE BEFORE BOMB then added an exclamation point. (Morris 29-31)

In these fictions there is an underlying concern that violence and death have become the strongest--if not the only--generators of social cohesiveness, and that even our simplest pleasures are now programmed by crafty manipulators we never see. This fear that invisible or incomprehensible forces are controlling our existence has been a characteristic

anxiety of American fictional protagonists from Melville's Ishmael to Saul Bellow's victim, Asa Leventhal (Tanner, City of Words 423).

Through one misadventure after another, Coverly Wapshot becomes entangled in the military codes of behavior dictated by his commanding officer, the Director of Talifer, Dr. Lemuel Cameron.

Cameron, like Nurse Ratched in Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, is the fanatic dictator of a mini-world organized according to rules which are senseless at best, insane at worst. His madness becomes apparent as he testifies to a congressional committee. He is able to respond with perfect precision to hostile questions which range from the huge cost overruns of his researches into interstellar communication and his belief that under certain conditions nuclear destruction of the planet is justifiable to the committee's growing suspicion that years ago he whipped and starved his son so cruelly that the child had to be institutionalized. His answers are invariably accurate and emotionless, as if in simply communicating the data he is fulfilling the reduced expectations of the new computer era. There is nothing remaining of the nineteenth century American optimism that powered what Leo Marx calls "the rhetoric of progress" or the language of "the technologically sublime" (The Machine in the Garden 193-195).

In its place, there is only fact and the candid assumption that human annihilation is now statistically probable:

"Is it true, Dr. Cameron, that you believe in the inevitability of hydrogen warfare?"

"Yes."

"Would you give us an estimate of the number of survivors?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't. It would be the roughest guesswork. I think there will be a substantial number of survivors."

"In the case of reverses, Dr. Cameron, would you be in favor of destroying the planet?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes I would. If we cannot survive, then we are entitled to destroy the planet..."

"Dr. Cameron," he asked, "don't you think that there might be some bond of warmth amongst the peoples of the earth that has been underestimated?"

"Some what?" Cameron was not discourteous, but he was dry.

"Some bond of human warmth," the old man said.

"Men and women," the doctor said, "are chemical entities, easily assessable, easily altered by the artificial increase or elimination of chromosomal

> structures, much more predictable, much more malleable,than some plant life and in many cases much less interesting."
> (The Wapshot Scandal 149)

The debasement of language from an expressive medium of poetry, affection, and hope to a functional exchange of data is one aspect of the spiritual impoverishment that Cheever associates with modern technology. While Coverly Wapshot is working one day in the computer room at Talifer, he conceives a plan which immediately excites him. He will use the giant computer to analyze the vocabulary of Keats's poetry to discover the exact number of words Keats used and their order of frequency. The final print-out amazes him:

> The number of words in the poetry came to fifteen thousand three hundred and fifty-seven. The vocabulary was eight thousand five hundred and three and the words in the order of their frequency were: "Silence blendeth grief's awakened fall/ The golden realms of death take all/Love's bitterness exceeds its grace/That bestial scar on the angelic face/Marks heaven with gall."

> "My God," Covery said. "It rhymes...I mean there's poetry within the poetry." (The Wapshot Scandal 91)

But, the computer poetry is, in essence, a lament revealing the ascendancy of death: the death of love, of spirit, of language.

This threnody for the decline of language in a technological society is linked to the death of the old patriarch, Leander Wapshot, and to the passing of St. Botolphs. Before he dies, Leander asks his cousin Honora for one last favor. He wishes to have Prospero's speech[1] said over his grave. Clearly, Cheever connects Leander with Shakespeare's magician: both are paternalistic rulers of a magical realm; both are pastoral figures who embody a reconciliation between art and nature; both would preside over a family in which tradition and decorum are valued. The essence of Leander's character resides in his desire that his

---

[1] Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air;
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

sons, Moses and Coverly, "grasp that the unobserved ceremoniousness of his life was a gesture or sacrament toward the excellence and the continuousness of things" (The Wapshot Chronicle 43).

It is this equation of manners with spiritual as well as social propriety that draws Leander--amd to some extent John Cheever as well--apart from the egalitarian tradition of American literature in which Walt Whitman could write, "What is commonest, cheapest, newest, easiest is Me," and Huck Finn could decide to abandon civilization and "light out for the territory." The underlying theme of the Wapshot novels that reverence for the ways and forms of the past is all that preserves a sacramental vision of life hints of Cheever's odd similarity of outlook to the Anglicized T.S. Eliot and to Yeats's certainty that innocence and beauty are born in "custom and ceremony" (W.B.Yeats, "A Prayer for my Daughter").

Yet, despite Leander's old world civility, there is something insistently American in his approximation to the Yankee stereotype that Constance Rourke has detailed in American Humor. Leander is deeply connected to his region, a "pork and beaner" in love with boats and the sea who relishes a good story and writes his journal in a poetic prose that takes its flavor not only from Leander's keen observations of natural life, but also from his stated preference for an unadorned style. Through his journal,

Leander emerges as the normative figure of an old New England sea-coast culture now almost lost, the flinty yet romantic pastoral hero whose final advice to Moses and Coverly might include the trivial along with the serious, but who never himself doubts the validity of the chivalric code he upholds:

> But Leander got the last word. Opening Aaron's copy of Shakespeare...Coverly found the place marked with a note in his father's hand. "Advice to my sons," it read. "Never put whisky into hot water bottle crossing borders of dry states or countries. Rubber will spoil taste...Wear dark clothes after 6 P.M. Eat fresh fish for breakfast when available. Avoid kneeling in unheated stone churches. Ecclesiastical dampness causes prematurely gray hair. Fear tastes like a rusty knife and do not let her into your house. Courage tastes of blood. Stand up straight. Admire the world. Relish the love of a gentle woman. Trust the Lord. (The Wapshot Chronicle 248)

Endowed--or perhaps burdened--by these directives, Coverly acknowledges that the central task of his life must be to find a bridge between the world of St. Botolphs and the

incomprehensible world beyond. Yet, each challenge he encounters in his picaresque adventures leaves him more reduced and bewildered.

Early in The Wapshot Chronicle, Leander takes Coverly--as he has taken Moses some years before--on a fishing trip which becomes a rite of initiation. But, by simply following his mother's advice to take a recipe book along, Coverly fails in his father's eyes. The rules concerning manhood are stark and unpredictable, and in the remainder of the two novels Coverly will be required to free himself from homosexual entanglements.

Perhaps the subtle suggestion of homosexual doubt that surrounds Coverly is an expression of Cheever's own sexual concern. Certainly, Coverly, the younger brother who is less handsome and athletic as well as less favored by the father is the character with whom Cheever identified. Cheever has written privately that before he was born, his father urged his mother to terminate her pregnancy. Similarly, during an extensive psychological test that Coverly takes to determine his suitability for employment in his cousin's New York carpet business, Coverly confides that his father, Leander, had wanted to hire an abortionist to end his life.

Coverly's naive honesty during the battery of psychological tests he is put through causes him to be pronounced unemployable by the seemingly gentle and

non-judgmental psychologist. The satire with which Cheever mocks the probing questions and arcane tests of the standardized psychological interview is only one instance of his attempt to somehow take revenge on a science he considered both false and reductive. Derived mainly from an aesthetic aversion to psychological jargon, Cheever's instinctive reaction to a psychoanalytic orientation became one of ridicule.

By turning away from any deep or prolonged exploration of his characters' lives, Cheever was forced to write a fiction in which coincidence and the lucky or unlucky event take the place of psychological forces as the motivation of behavior. It is this increased importance of chance that generates the episodic quality of the Wapshot novels and contributes to the strange loneliness of the Wapshot world. In thrall to fortune rather than fate, the family members have no power to resist either the forces which blow them into separate adventures or the incomprehensible workings of the mass cultures that lie beyond the boundaries of St. Botolphs.

Chapter Five

The Housebreaker of Shady Hill

"In what aspect could a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers be said to have, on the old 'woe of the world,' any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society could guess? The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what it destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals."

Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance

"It is possible to become imprisoned in a system of one's own choosing as well as in a system of another's imposing."

Tony Tanner, City of Words

"The pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery, and it has not yet lost its hold upon the native imagination."

Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden

Perhaps it is not surprising that during the years Cheever was producing the Wapshot novels, he was also writing the stories set in Shady Hill. In many ways, St. Botolphs and Shady Hill are similar. Both are villages which are homogenous in terms of race and outlook; both represent, with an almost narcotic potency, the attraction that places of permanence always held for John Cheever. Yet, because Shady Hill is not the fictional location of his autobiographical past, Cheever was able to let the suburban setting slip free

of confining personal myth and thus take on the darker coloration of his authentic imaginative vision.

For Cheever, the suburb became the landscape in which the contradictions of American life are revealed most clearly. It is in the suburb--Shady Hill first, and then Proxmire Manor, B-, and Bullet Park-- that both the promise and the wreckage of America come to the surface: the neighborliness and the violence; the Utopian longing for community and the competitiveness; the hope for a respite from turmoil and the reality of unceasing pressure. In Cheever's fiction, the suburb is more than a place: it is a state of mind that marks the final point and the futility of America's long romance with the pastoral dream.

The pastoral yearning that underlies so much of America's literature is the dream of regaining paradise through spatial movement (Karl 7), the hope that by escaping cities and towns with their noise and congestion, their wearisome restrictions, and threatening dangers, we can discover a more authentic life in proximity to nature.

By 1785, when Thomas Jefferson published his Notes on Virginia, the pastoral ideal was already a dominant outlook in America (Marx 88). It was easy to see in the rugged and individualistic American farmer a new incarnation of the Virgilian shepherd, and to contrast the stereotypical virtues of the agrarian life such as independence, piety, and egalitarianism with the supposed corruptions of the urban man

of business. "I view large cities," Jefferson wrote, "as pestilential to the morals, the health and the liberties of man" (Jackson 68).

Yet, by 1830, machine power was already transforming the American landscape, and the locomotive was becoming a national obsession, a symbol of man's ability to triumph over natural obstacles. Even Ralph Waldo Emerson, who believed that "landscape was a great religious metaphor, an expositor of the divine mind" (Marx 97) conceded that "machinery and Transcendentalism agree well," and that "the readers and thinkers of 1854 are the men on the morning train into the city" (Jackson 38)

Certainly, the expansion of train travel was one of the important factors that led to the development of suburbs beyond the city borders. Along the railroad tracks, real estate became a desirable investment and by 1875 the population of America's outlying districts was growing rapidly.[1]

Yet the development of more convenient and inexpensive commuter lines is not a sufficient explanation in itself for the growth of the suburb. The industrialization of America, the proliferation of factories and office buildings, the flood

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[1] I am indebted to Kenneth Jackson's Crabgrass Frontier for the following summary of the factors influencing America's suburban movement.

tide of immigrants into the cities during the last quarter of the nineteenth century as well as the fear of epidemics all contributed to America's determination to repossess in the suburb the original pastoral way of life that had never lost its appeal. The emergent values of privacy and domesticity became part of a cycle in which those who could afford the safety and seclusion of suburban life rationalized their choice through a quasi-religious association of private home ownership with moral rectitude and clean living.

As Kenneth Jackson points out, this sort of idealization of the home led naturally to a vision of the suburban house as an Edenic retreat, a place removed from the tumult and disorder of the outer world. As a concomitant of this image, it became a vital part of the suburban ideal to have a spacious lawn, a green and leafy bower that would suggest the leisure and spiritual tranquility of the contemplative life.

There is an irony implicit in this notion of suburbia as the new Arcadia, a naivety that Lewis Mumford defines perceptively in The City in History:

> To be your own unique self; to build your unique house, mid a unique landscape; to live...a self-centered life, in which private fantasy and caprice would have license to express themselves openly,

> in short, to withdraw like a monk and live like a prince--this was the purpose of the original creators of the suburb. They proposed in effect to create an asylum, in which they could, as individuals, overcome the chronic effects of civilization while still commanding at will the privileges and benefits of urban society. (qtd. in Jackson 71)

It is clear today that from the beginning, the suburban movement was characterized by contradiction. It appealed to the dream of a simple life, but entailed enormous attention to the material environment; it offered the autonomy of private homes but encouraged conformity; it seemed to promise the comforts of a cohesive community but became a symbol of fragmentation; and it echoed the equation Thomas Jefferson had made between rural life and the preservation of egalitarian democracy even as it mocked those same values by excluding everyone who did not have the requisite economic power, racial background, or social status.

Cheever was always painfully aware of the contradictions. In one of his finest stories, "The Scarlet Moving Van," he writes perceptively of the suburb as a place reserved exclusively for those who know how to succeed:

Goodbye to the mortal boredom of distributing a skinny chicken to a family of seven and all the other rites of the hill towns. I don't mean the real hill towns--Assisi or Perugia or Saracinesco, perched on a three-thousand-foot crag, with walls the dispiriting gray of shirt cardboards and mustard lichen blooming on the crooked roofs. The land, in fact, was flat, the houses frame. This was in the eastern United States, and the kind of place where most of us live. It was the unincorporated township of B----, with a population of perhaps two hundred married couples, all of them with dogs and children, and many of them with servants; it resembled a hill town only in a manner of speaking, in that the ailing, the disheartened, and the poor could not ascend the steep moral path that formed its natural defense, and the moment any of the inhabitants became infected with unhappiness or discontent, they sensed the hopelessness of existing on such a high spiritual latitude, and went to live in the plain. Life was unprecedentedly comfortable and tranquil.

B---- was exclusively for the felicitous. (CS 425)

Although he perceived the cruelties of suburban life, Cheever left New York City in 1951 with a sense of relief. He had never really been a city man. From the moment he moved out of Manhattan to the Hudson River suburb of Scarborough, he simply discarded the option of an urban setting for his life or his fiction. Yet, Cheever's transplantation from East Fifty-Ninth Street to a small home on the Frank E. Vanderlip estate known as Beechwood was in no way a move from urban complexity to rural simplicity. From the doorway of the house he rented, Cheever could see the old five-story clapboard Vanderlip mansion and watch the guests who arrived for the Vanderlips' parties attired in dinner jackets and evening gowns. Each season in Scarborough had its special allure for Cheever. In winter there was skating and then afterwords the pleasure of fireside drinks with friends. In spring, there was abundant natural beauty to admire, and Cheever often used his private journals almost as exercise books in which to practice the art of scenic description:

> The glory of these spring evenings in the valley....The twilight glares on the wet stones of the terrace. For a second the wet blacktop road is as blue as heaven. Through the brush I see the glow of garish, metallic light. Then this goes...It begins to rain in earnest and the

> cold water clears my head. I stand at the screen
> door for half an hour (I'm busy I tell the children)
> watching this spring evening in which the dark is so
> slow to gather, in which a glow beats up through
> the gray rain from the lawns and flowering trees.
> I seem to try to decipher this. Similes yes, the
> elm like a piece of wooden lightning; but the
> heart of the scene is withheld as, in looking
> inwardly to our own motives, the key, the
> beginning, is something we will
> never see. (Qtd. in Home Before Dark 83)

Of all the seasonal activities, Cheever took the most pleasure in swimming. As if in eerie rehearsal for "The Swimmer," a story he would write some years after his move to Westchester, he delighted in the summertime opportunity to swim through other people's pools, stop in their gardens for drinks, and observe the authentic Magrittes that hung on their pool-house walls.

In Home Before Dark, the memoir she wrote of her father, Susan Cheever comments on the complex nature of Cheever's relation to his new environment:

> My father was always a visitor, a tenant. Perhaps
> he didn't want to be bothered with owning things, or

> or maybe he felt he didn't deserve them. There was a practical problem as well: Until the 1960's he never made enough money to afford much elegance of his own. But at some level my father was always the homeless boy, the outsider, the one who stood at the edge of 'respectable' life looking critically but wistfully in at his friends and neighbors. (32)

Although it is certainly true that John Cheever thought of himself as vaguely fraudulent in the role of country householder, as a parvenu among the settled suburban aristocracy, he also embraced the new life with an eagerness that guaranteed him full social acceptance. And he was charming. Everyone looked forward to seeing him. Susan Cheever tells of the way he was always welcome at whatever house he happened to visit. "'Oh John,' people would say as his battered brown Volkswagen pulled in through their wrought-iron gates and up their gravel drives;'oh good, it's John'" (Home Before Dark 33).

In return for social acceptance, Cheever gave back a kind of loyalty that bound him, in the suburban fiction, to the vantage point of an observer-participant within the community. The mood of the stories set in Shady Hill encompasses both the exultation of feeling securely embedded in a close social

community and the irascible awareness that such inclusion has been purchased at a punishing price. Yet, even as Cheever describes the threadbare social rituals and sodden Sunday evenings, there is a certain compassion in his tone. Like F. Scott Fitzgerald, he has a generosity of feeling for the characters in his fiction who have acquiesced to the reality of a very limited dream. Although there is satire in his vision of the middle-aged host of a barbecue party who hangs a sign from his rose arbor that says Whiskey Gulch, Cheever refuses to dismiss the pain of his suburban characters as unworthy of serious examination. "It goes without saying," he often repeated, "that the people in my stories and the things that happen to them could take place anywhere" (Unger 185).

It is not necessarily a repudiation of Cheever's work to see a certain ingenuousness in this assertion. For the crises that erupt in the suburban fiction are clearly linked to the characters' wistful hope that the purchase of a new life in the country will yield the spiritual renewal that has always been associated with the pastoral dream, and the inevitable sorrows of age and human limitation seem to become magnified and surreal when set in an environment that has been created to zone out trouble. What Cheever is implying is that implicit in the suburban dream of order is the most lethal disorder of all.

In his study of modern American literature, City of

turns into the nightmare of the world as a force inhibiting freedom" (267). Cheever's characters open themselves to their suburban surroundings and then are helpless as the exterior world presses in so forcefully that all possibility of a vital inner life is crushed. Repetitively, they deny themselves even the validity of their own unhappiness through the guilty sense that their troubles in comparison to others' must be relatively trivial:

> My wife is often sad because her sadness is not a sad sadness, sorry because her sorrow is not a crushing sorrow. She grieves because her grief is not an acute grief, and when I tell her that this sorrow over the inadequacies of her sorrow might be a new hue in the spectrum of human pain, she is not consoled. ("A Vision of the World" CS 606)

The physical beauty and comfort of the environment thus become strangely threatening, a denatured version of nature that inhibits emotional honesty.

There is an unwritten code in Shady Hill that unpleasant things will not be mentioned. Irene Wryson knows that her nightmares of nuclear apocalypse will seem inappropriate when recalled at a breakfast table which commands a charming view

of the garden (The Wrysons 378). And when Francis Weed, the protagonist of "The Country Husband," sees that the maid who has been hired to serve dinner at the Farquarson's party is the same woman whose punishment as a collaborator he witnessed in France during World War II, he instantly decides to say nothing at all:

> The war seemed now so distant and that world where the cost of partisanship had been death or torture so long ago. Francis had lost track of the men who had been with him in Vesey. He could not count on Julia's discretion. He could not tell anyone. And if he had told the story now, at the dinner table, it would have been a social as well as a human error. The people in the Farquarsons' living room seemed united in their tacit claim that there had been no past, no war--that there was no danger or trouble in the world. In the recorded history of human arrangements, this extraordinary meeting would have fallen into place, but the atmosphere of Shady Hill made the memory unseemly and impolite. (CS 330)

The substitution of party chatter for genuine communication becomes an accepted element of existence in the fraudulent world of Shady Hill. Although the town seems a vision of pastoral order with its lush foliage, rose arbors, and carefully tended homes, there is a strange malice about the place. Deception is everywhere. The Dutch Colonial home that Francis Weed lives in with his wife Julia and their four children is larger than it appears to be from the driveway, and although it seems to offer every comfort, it is in truth an uneasy sort of retreat. When Francis finally walks into his living room after an airplane journey that has ended with an emergency landing in a cornfield, no one will listen to his story. The children are too absorbed in their own antagonisms and Julia is radiant but utterly uninterested as she lights the candles in the dining room.

Even the plot of the story turns on the comedy of duplicity. On the next night, as Francis Weed waits in the car to take their usual baby-sitter home, he sees a young and lovely girl come out onto the lighted stoop. As he drives Anne Murchison home, Francis realizes that he has fallen in love with her. His infatuation is the painful longing of a middle-aged married man for a liaison which is as unlikely as it is inappropriate.

The situation is the classic occasion for farce, and Cheever exploits each opportunity for comic confusion. After

the next dinner party which the Weeds attend, Francis waits in the car in a fever of expectation only to find that the baby-sitter is the matronly Mrs. Henlein. Several days later, when Francis is certain that he sees Anne Murchison on the commuter train, he hurries along the crowded aisle only to find that the girl he has glimpsed is not Anne at all. Deception is woven into the texture of Francis Weed's suburban life; he no sooner becomes infatuated with Anne Murchison then he must pose on the front stoop one autumnal evening with Julia and the four smiling children for their annual Christmas card photograph. The tricky disguises of the world Francis inhabits spread even to the office of the psychiatrist he turns to in his distress:

> The scene for his miserere mei Deus was like the waiting room of so many doctor's offices, a crude token gesture toward the sweets of domestic bliss: a place arranged with antiques, coffee tables, potted plants, and etchings of snow-covered bridges and geese in flight, although there were no children, no marriage bed, no stove, even, in this travesty of a house, where no one had ever spent the night and where the curtained windows looked straight onto a dark air shaft. (CS 344)

The trickiness of the environment seems even to contaminate Francis Weed himself, for he takes out his resentment against Anne Murchison's boyfriend by sabotaging the youth's chance to get a good job. Although Francis Weed refuses to admit it, his dislike for Clayton Thomas derives in part from the boy's open scorn for Shady Hill. "So much energy is spent in perpetuating the place--keeping out undesirables, and so forth," Clayton says to the Weeds. "...The only idea of the future anyone has is just more and more commuting trains and more parties. I don't think that's healthy. I think people ought to be able to dream big dreams about the future. I think people ought to be able to dream great dreams" (CS 338).

With his hornrimmed glasses and overblown rhetoric, the boy becomes faintly ridiculous as if Cheever must make any character who does not fit into Shady Hill somewhat suspect as a truth-teller. It is here that Cheever's own ambivalence becomes evident, for he both sees and refuses to see, tells and undoes the telling simultaneously.

At the conclusion of "The Country Husband," after Francis Weed's passion for the teen-ager has come to nothing, and after the psychiatrist has urged him to take up woodwork as a therapeutic hobby, we see him happily puttering in his cellar. His dissatisfactions have blown away like so many wayward breezes. As if in harmony with Francis Weed's restored

contentment, the narrator of "The Country Husband" closes the story with a tender look backward at the tranquil suburb:

> It is a week or ten days later in Shady Hill. The seven-fourteen has come and gone, and here and there dinner is finished and the dishes are in the dish-washing machine. The village hangs, morally and economically by a thread; but it hangs by its thread in the evening light....
>
> Then it is dark; it is a night where kings in golden suits ride elephants over the mountains. (CS 346)

Like so many of Cheever's suburban stories, "The Country Husband" is structured in three movements: a character finds himself in defiance of the system; he struggles toward greater autonomy; he is defeated by the lure of adjustment and soon settles back into conformity. And even the one moment of rebellion which the character experiences is purchased at great price. After he sees the impossibility--and still more, the foolishness--of trying to escape, the suburban protagonist surrenders to an existence which has become even more rigid and reduced than it was at the beginning.

Alfred Kazin has written that the characters in Cheever's

suburban stories never engage in actual struggle with their surrounding society, that the conflict invariably remains internal and private. ("O'Hara, Cheever, and Updike," in Essays 124). Kazin makes a perceptive point: there is no battle because society has long ago won the war. Divided between a pained awareness of the costs of conformity and his own desire for social acceptance, Cheever manages subtly to throw his forces behind the conservative lines. It is this complicity with the suburban state of mind that, at times, mars his work and causes him to invent the sudden endings which quickly redefine the protagonist's conflict as merely a temporary and comic aberration.

Yet the difficulties which Cheever's stories uncover cannot be swept away so quickly. The inherent contradictions resist disguise. In Shady Hill, the incessant parties mask unappeasable loneliness. No one seems able to share a comfortable moment, to connect at all except through drink or Dionysiac revelry.

As one of the recurrent settings for violence, the parties, in Cheever's suburban fiction, become strange masques at which discontent explodes in exaggerated revelry:

> It was late by then--it was after midnight--and that dance was always a rhubarb. The floor was crowded, and plumes, crowns, animal heads, and

> turbans were rocking in the dim light. It was that hour when the band accelerates its beat, when the drums deepen, when the aging dancers utter loud cries of lust and joy, seize their partners by the girdle, and break into all kinds of youthful and wanton specialities-- the shimmy, the Charleston, hops, and belly dances. ("Just Tell Me Who It Was" CS 376)

Like shadows passing over grass, the parties in Cheever's suburban fiction change into surreal gatherings of grotesques who fortify themselves with liquor, costume, and noise against the realization that their loud gaiety has become a danse macabre.

It is this Bacchic coupling of revelry and violence, frivolity and death that Cheever evokes in "O Youth and Beauty," one of his most widely anthologized stories. The story is structured around three parties that become suburban stations of the cross in the life of Cash Bentley, the aging protagonist. At the first party, in the opening scene of the story, it is almost dawn. To bring the revel to its close, a ritual which has become accepted as the symbolic last act of most Shady Hill parties is about to be enacted:

> At the tag end of nearly every long, large

Saturday-night party in the suburb of Shady Hill, when almost everybody who was going to play golf or tennis in the morning had gone home hours ago and the ten or twelve people remaining seemed powerless to bring the evening to an end although the gin and whiskey were running low, and here and there a woman who was sitting out her husband would have begun to drink milk; when everybody had lost track of time, and the baby-sitters who were waiting at home for these diehards would have long since stretched out on the sofa and fallen into a deep sleep...when the bellicose drunk, the crapshooter, the pianist, and the woman faced with the expiration of her hopes had all expressed themselves; when every proposal--to go to the Farquarsons' for breakfast, to go swimming, to go and wake up the Townsends, to go here and go there--died as soon as it was made, then Trace Bearden would begin to chide Cash Bentley about his age and thinning hair. The chiding was preliminary to moving the living-room furniture. Dragging the furniture into an impromptu course of hurdles, Trace Bearden and Cash Bentley prepare for the bizarre race Cash always runs.

> At the sound of a pistol fired from the open window of the host's suburban home, Cash leaps over tables and chairs, sofas, and firescreens in a strange re-eneactment of his youthful triumphs as a track star. There is "not a piece of furniture," the narrator tells us, "that Cash could not take in his stride" (CS 210).

For Cash, the race has become emblematic of his youth and his ability to compete. It is the last thing that excites in him the scent of danger and thrill.

As a metaphor, the race suggests the limited values that govern existence in Shady Hill. Throughout Cheever's suburban stories, characters confuse zany acts of bravado eccentricity with strength of character. Physical prowess and skill at games becomes the visible mark of grace, the sign of one's ability to prevail in a competitive world. For women, this emphasis translates into the imperative to be good looking. There is little forgiveness in the suburban world Cheever establishes for those who are not lovely:

> A peculiar fate seems to overtake homely women at the ends of parties--and journeys, too. Their curls and their ribbons come undone, particles of food cling to their teeth, their glasses steam,

> and the wide smile with which they planned to charm the world lapses into a look of habitual discontent and bitterness. ("Just Tell Me Who It Was" CS 381)

In the same way that the terms of human appraisal are harsh, the societal law of Shady Hill is dangerous. The narrator of "O Youth and Beauty" assumes quite casually that the host of a party will usually be able to produce a pistol with which to fire off the starting shot for Cash's race. It is the presence of this latent violence that gives Cheever's suburbs their element of grotesque, for enclosing the violence, nearly concealing it, is the visible world of pastoral charm:

> Then it is a summer night, a wonderful summer night.The passengers on the eight-fifteen see Shady Hill--if they notice it at all--in a bath of placid golden light. The noise of the train is muffled in the heavy foliage, and the long car windows look like a string of lighted aquarium tanks before they flicker out of sight. Up on the hill, the ladies say to one another, "Smell the grass! Smell the trees!" (CS 215)

The beauty of Shady Hill, however, is reserved for winners. When Cash Bentley falls and breaks his leg while running the hurdle race at his thirtieth anniversary party, he becomes depressed.

> "I won't be able to run the hurdle race any more, sweetheart," he told Louise sadly. She said that it didn't matter, but while it didn't matter to her, it seemed to matter to Cash. He had lost weight in the hospital. His spirits were low. He seemed discontented. He did not himself understand what had happened. He, or everything around him, seemed subtly to have changed for the worse. (CS 214)

Despairing, Cash stands in his dark kitchen looking out at "a young people's party" in the garden next door. All at once, he feels the pain of being middle-aged, of "being deprived of his athletic prowess, his impetuousness, his good looks--of everything that meant anything to him" (CS 216). To cheer Cash out of his doldrums, his wife Louise goes with him to a Saturday night dance at the club. But Cash remains disconsolate. As the party is winding down, Cash determines once again to attempt the hurdle race. This time, although he gets to the finish line, the effort nearly finishes him off. His face becomes strained, his mouth hangs open, and only

moments after clearing the final sofa, he groans and briefly collapses.

Unable to accept the semi-victory of simply having completed the course one more time to public acclaim, Cash spends the next day in the usual suburban Sunday pattern of gathering at friends to eat leftover Saturday night party food. Coming home exhausted and depressed, he goes upstairs to talk to Louise. Then, from their bedroom, Louise hears him moving the living room furniture around. Hurrying down, she sees Cash, in his stocking feet, prepared once again to run his desperate race. When he hands her the pistol, and orders her to fire off the starting shot, he is in far too great a hurry to give her adequate directions:

> "Hurry up," he said, "I can't wait all night."
>
> He had forgotten to tell her about the safety, and when she pulled the trigger nothing happened.
>
> "It's that little lever," he said. "Press that little lever." Then, in his impatience, he hurdled the sofa anyhow.
>
> The pistol went off and Louise got him in midair. She shot him dead. (CS 218)

Breaking suddenly to the surface, the latent violence of Louise Bentley's act suggests both hate and tenderness; by the

end of the story, it is clear to the reader that Cash can neither run the race nor find another way to exist. His need to perform the hurdle race is typical of the characters Cheever invents to populate his fictional suburbs. The inhabitants of Shady Hill--and of the later suburbs as well--tend to adopt rigid patterns of behavior which they repeat obsessively in the attempt to ward off a threat they can never define. They leap furniture, bake cakes at midnight, get drunk at parties, stand on dining room tables to strip off their clothes as if to express that which they cannot communicate in words. Their distrust of language, their dislike for emotional complexity makes them strangely similar to the despairing characters of Hemingway's fiction who have been too disillusioned by empty rhetoric ever to trust the abstraction of words.

This distrust of any dialogue that is honestly analytical or that deals with philosophical or psychological issues becomes connected to the desolating emptiness of their inner lives. There is no character in the suburban fiction who pursues a passionate interest in an art, science, or intellectual pursuit nor is there a character such as Ratliff in Faulkner's The Hamlet or George Willard in Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio to whom the reader can turn for a version of the present which is enriched by a wise or compassionate view of the past. The protagonists of the

suburban stories are all businessmen, "guardians of the ordinary" (Olderman 4). Yet once they leave the suburb on the morning commuter train, they generally leave the story as well. Only when their jobs are tiresomely reductive such as writing a commercial for a new mouthwash called Elixircol does the reader learn exactly what it is that they do. As a result, all possibility of fulfillment through work is implicitly denied; whatever delight there is to be found, must be gained through the pleasures of the external world.

It is the spiritual sterility that is associated with this bland assumption that there is no more to be desired from existence than a comfortable home, a pretty and easy-going wife, pleasant food, nice company, and a steady income that Cheever portrays--perhaps against his own intention--in "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill," the title story of the volume published in 1958.

The narrator of "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill" reveals his realistic, matter-of-fact outlook with his first sentence: "My name is Johnny Hake" (CS 253). Johnny Hake is a man who takes pride in his ability to deal efficiently with external affairs. Consequently, when Hake gets fired from his job as an executive in the Parablendeum manufacturing company, the loss of his status and his income are the precise assaults he can tolerate least. His bitterness is increased by the reason for which he was fired: he has refused to do a nasty piece of

hatchet work for his boss.

Johnny is essentially a "regular" guy--outgoing, eager to participate in games, a member of the club. Although limited in his intellectual scope, he is good hearted. He is happy when on summer evenings he can grill steaks for his family and peer down the front of his wife Christina's dress. Like so many of Cheever's suburban protagonists, Johnny Hake extols the worth of simple joys. Enjoying sport, delighting in nature, revelling in hearty sex and physical vitality are his signposts to the good life.

The thought that he must turn to thievery in his present financial crisis, and rob his neighbors in order to preserve his place within the safe zone of Shady Hill is abhorrent to him. Yet Johnny is a man who knows what must be done. In a condition of sick dread, he begins to make midnight passages across the back yards of Shady Hill. In the dark, and in the silent, shadowy bedrooms he enters, Johnny sees the suburb from the new perspective of an outsider. This new awareness as well as his descent into crime plunges him into gloom. He sees the moral laxity of the world around him; he hears, with an inward shudder, the advice of a friend to take advantage of a business proposition that is "a steal." Worst of all, he feels suddenly that his undiscovered crimes have somehow barred him from social acceptance within Shady Hill. When his two sons inform him that they have all been excluded from a

neighbor's softball party, Johnny sinks into gloom:

> Why hadn't I been asked to play softball at the Toblers'? I wondered. Why had we been excluded from these simple pleasures, this lighthearted gathering, the fading laughter and voices and slammed doors which seemed to gleam in the darkness as they were withdrawn from my possession....Why should I be left alone with my dead leaves in the twilight--as I was--feeling so forsaken, lonely, and forlorn that I was chilled? (CS 264)

Johnny is filled with distaste not only for the world, but also for the sickly melancholia of his own thoughts. He has no liking for those whom he considers to be unduly depressed by the unhappiness of others:

> If there is anybody I detest, it is weak-minded sentimentalists--all those melancholy people who, out of an excess of sympathy for others, miss the thrill of their own essence and drift through life without identity, like a human fog, feeling sorry for everyone. The legless beggar in Times Square with his poor display of pencils, the rouged old

silent, shadowy bedrooms he enters, Johnny sees the suburb from the new perspective of an outsider. This new awareness as well as his descent into crime plunges him into gloom. He sees the moral laxity of the world around him; he hears, with an inward shudder, the advice of a friend to take advantage of a business proposition that is "a steal." Worst of all, he feels suddenly that his undiscovered crimes have somehow barred him from social acceptance within Shady Hill. When his two sons inform him that they have all been excluded from a neighbor's softball party, Johnny sinks into gloom. He is filled with distaste not only for the world, but also for the sickly melancholia of his own thoughts. He has no liking for those whom he considers to be unduly depressed by the unhappiness of others:

> If there is anybody I detest, it is weak-minded sentimentalists--all those melancholy people who, out of an excess of sympathy for others, miss the thrill of their own essence and drift through life without identity, like a human fog, feeling sorry for everyone.... Detesting this company, then, it was doubly painful to find myself in it. ("Housebreaker" 314)

In Johnny Hake's ruminations there is a frightening crudity, an equation of psychic survival with a willingness to accept the cruelties of human existence.

Certainly the correspondence between Johnny Hake's predicament and Cheever's vision of himself as a marginally poor man trying to stay afloat is very real. Cheever was always painfully aware that his determination to support himself as a writer necessitated continued popular acceptance. This determination to prevail within the literary, economic, and social structures of American life required from him a basic acquiescence to the proposition that the system itself was essentially just and benign.

It is here that the story takes on its ominously conservative cast, for staying within the social grid becomes the highest good. Johnny's joy at the story's conclusion--when he is rehired by the Parablendeum company and safely reconciled with both his family and his community--derives from being let back into the system.

The characters in Cheever's suburban fiction live in dread of losing their places, of falling from the heights of the suburban hill towns into the cities and rural areas from which they have come. Their anxiety expands to encompass the fear that others who are less desirable than they but more ruthless will soon try to get what they already have.

It is this apprehensiveness that Cheever dramatizes so skillfully in "The Wrysons," a story which although set in Shady Hill was published in a later collection entitled

Some People, Places and Things That Will Not Appear in My Next Novel (1961). The opening of the story sets the fundamental terms that define Donald and Irene Wryson's behavior:

> The Wrysons wanted things in the suburb of Shady Hill to remain exactly as they were. Their dread of change--of irregularity of any sort--was acute, and when the Larkin estate was sold for an old people's rest home, the Wrysons went to the Village Council meeting and demanded to know what sort of old people these old people were going to be. The Wrysons' civic activities were confined to upzoning, but they were very active in this field, and if you were invited to their house for cocktails, the chances were that you would be asked to sign an upzoning petition before you got away. This was something more than a natural desire to preserve the character of the community. They seemed to sense that there was a stranger at the gates--unwashed, tirelessly scheming, foreign, the father of disorderly children who would ruin their rose garden and depreciate their real-estate investment, a man with a beard, a garlic breath, and a beard. ("Wrysons" 378)

The fierce will to keep her town unchanged dominates Irene Wryson's dreams. Repetitively, she has a nightmare in

which a hydrogen bomb has exploded after which refugees from the city move in a mass exodus towards Shady Hill. Their arrival will mean the end of the familiar and comforting suburban order.

Irene's husband Donald Wryson is equally committed to protecting the established order. He is "a cheerful bully" in defense of "rectitude, class distinctions, and the orderly appearance of things"("Wrysons" 378).

The obvious dislike with which Cheever lampoons the Wrysons mocks the suburban tendency to see home ownership as a sign of moral propriety. Cheever's own sense of himself as an actor playing the role of propertied suburbanite made him sensitive to the pervasiveness in America of an outlook that associated well kept lawns with ethical behavior.

In his study of the American suburb, Crabgrass Frontier, Kenneth Jackson notes the odd tendency of nineteenth century American preachers to speak of home ownership as a way of life conducive to piety and marital fidelity. A frequently-given lecture by Russell Conwell in the middle of the century

captures this attitude exactly:

> My friend, you take and drive me--if you furnish the auto--out in the suburbs of Philadelphia and introduce me to the people who own their homes around this great city, those beautiful homes with gardens and flowers, those magnificent homes so lovely in their art, and I will introduce you to the very best people in character as well as enterprise in our city, and you know I will. A man is not really a true man until he owns his own home. (50)

The implicit danger in this formulation is that any economic reversal, any random appearance of disorder is perceived as a symptom of spiritual decline.

The Wrysons' yearning for stasis imperils their emotional stability. Not only is Irene Wryson troubled by nuclear nightmares, but Donald Wryson must also assuage his anxieties through solitary and secret sessions of cake baking in his kitchen at four in the morning while Irene sleeps. Neither can tell the other of the fears that torment them. They live in a marital loneliness made impenetrable by the suburban understanding that to speak of extreme and unpleasant emotion

within the boundaries of Shady Hill is to violate the code of appearances. There is never a moment of release in which one character fully perceives the source and magnitude of another's anguish. When Mrs. Wryson discovers her husband baking cakes alone, she makes no effort to understand the underlying cause:

> Some comprehension--perhaps momentary--of the complexity of life must have come to them, but it was only momentary. There were no further explanations. He threw the cake which was burned to a cinder into the garbage, and they turned out the lights and climbed the stairs, more mystified by life than ever, and more interested than ever in a good appearance. (CS 324)

The loneliness endemic in Cheever's imagined suburbs becomes a symptom of pathology in "The Five- Forty- Eight". There are only two characters in the story, and they are bound together solely through the degree of their mutual hatred. Everything in the story is pared down and reduced. Even the protagonist is given just the one name of Blake as if the extremity of his amorality has somehow stripped him of the right to possess both Christian and surname.

Unlike Cheever's characteristic suburban protagonists,

Blake has no redeeming qualities. He is a man who is cold and indifferent to his wife, contentious and judgmental with his neighbors, and sadistic in his dealings with his secretary, a young woman called Miss Dent whose mind is as warped as her name suggests.[2]

After Blake hires Miss Dent, he notices that her handwriting is strange "as if she had been the victim of some inner--some emotional--conflict that had in its violence broken the continuity of the lines she was able to make on paper" (CS 238). When Miss Dent invites Blake to her tiny, closet-like apartment, he drinks her whisky, takes her to bed, and then hurriedly leaves despite the fact that she is weeping. Her tears are of as little importance to him as are her hints that she has recently been ill.

On the next day, Blake does the efficient thing to avoid complications: he calls up the personnel office of his company, instructs them to fire Miss Dent, and then goes out for the afternoon. To his relief, he hears nothing from his ex-secretary for three weeks. Then, one rainy evening, as he is leaving the office building to catch the five-forty-eight to Shady Hill, he sees her waiting for him in the lobby. Trying to avoid her, he hurries out into the darkening streets

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[2] It is interesting to note that Raymond Carver used Miss Dent as the main character in his story called "The Train" which is collected in Cathedral. The story is dedicated to John Cheever

towards Grand Central Station.

The New York that Cheever creates as the setting for this story is confining and bleak. The rain seems to intensify the sounds of traffic, the sidewalks are crowded, and the buildings loom above the avenues like walls. Stopping to rest before a store window, Blake sees a decorator's display designed to look like a room "in which people live and entertain their friends. There were cups on the coffee table, magazines to read, and flowers in the vases, but the flowers were dead and the cups were empty and the guests had not come" (CS 236).

Nothing is as it seems in the city, and as Blake approaches the area near Grand Central "with its maze of street-level and underground passages, elevator banks, and crowded lobbies," (CS 237) he admonishes himself to stay calm, to resist the impulse to run or to look back over his shoulder and see whether Miss Dent is behind him. Hurrying through the station, he climbs aboard the five-forty-eight only to find, after it pulls out of the tunnel, that Miss Dent has followed him onto the train. With careful politeness, she requests permission to sit down beside Blake and then apologetically tells him that she has a gun in her purse. She will kill him if he tries to get away. She is determined to talk to him, to explain her situation, to make him understand. She has been out of work since he had her fired, and during the past

two weeks she has been in a mental hospital. Now, no one else will hire her. But, she has one advantage. If she has to shoot him, her history of mental illness will keep her out of prison. She will only be returned to the hospital.

Blake's commute to Shady Hill becomes his slow passage to Golgotha:

> The train creaked, slowed, and halted infirmly at another station. Blake could see the southbound platform where a few passengers were waiting to go into the city....Some advertisements were posted on the wall behind them. There was a picture of a couple drinking a toast in wine, a picture of Cat's Paw rubber heel, and a picture of a Hawaiian dancer. Their cheerful intent seemed to go no farther than the puddles of water on the platform and to expire there. The platform and the people on it looked lonely. The train drew away from the station into the scattered lights of a slum and then into the darkness of the country and the river. (CS 244)

Trapped in the train with Miss Dent, Blake has no choice but to listen to her accusations, and finally, when they arrive at Shady Hill, to follow her directions. She knows

exactly what she will have of him in revenge. Ordering him to kneel, and to put his head in the dirt beside the railroad tracks, Miss Dent tries to rid herself of the pain and humiliation he has caused her:

> He got to his knees. He bent his head. "There," she said. "You see, if you do what I say, I won't harm you...." He fell forward in the filth. The coal skinned his face. He stretched out on the ground, weeping. "Now I feel better," she said. "Now I can wash my hands of you, I can wash my hands of all this, because you see there is some kindness, some saneness in me that I can find and use. I can wash my hands." Then he heard her footsteps go away from him, over rubble.... He raised his head. He saw her climb the stairs of the wooden footbridge and cross it and go down to the other platform, where her figure in the dim light looked small, common, and harmless. He raised himself out of the dust--warily at first, until he saw by her attitude, her looks, that she had forgotten him; that she had completed what she had wanted to do, and that he was safe. He got to his feet

> and picked up his hat from the ground where it had fallen and walked home. (CS 247)

Ending on this note of ambiguity, the story allows no certainty regarding the effect this experience will have on Blake. His mentality seems to remain as tight and confined as the dim and narrow commuter train threading its repetitive way between city and suburb. No longer is the train symbolic of an orderly transition between work and rest, office and home. Instead, it has become the ominous engine which will carry Cheever's characters from the relatively safe world of Shady Hill to the unpredictable and surreal boundaries of the suburbs beyond.

Chapter Six

Suburban Grotesque

"In truly grotesque works, the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life.There may be strange gaps and skips which would not be appropriate to a novel of conventional realism. Yet the characters have an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework. Their fictional qualities lean away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected...."

-- Flannery O'Connor, Mystery and Manners

"In the summer my father used to play three or four holes of golf before breakfast, before he went to work. I sometimes went along with him. The links were only a short walk from the house. The course was set above the river, and from the first fairway he played you could see down to Travertine and the blue water of the bay. Early one morning, he noticed omething hanging from a tree in the woods beside the fairway. He thought it was perhaps some clothing left there by the lovers who used the woods at night. As he walked down the grass, he saw it was the body of a man. The face was swollen and contorted, but he recognized his old friend Harry Dobson. He cut down the body with a pocketknife and called Dr. Henry from the nearest house, although he should have called the police. He gave away his clubs that afternoon and never played golf again."

--From the Journals of John Cheever

"Unlike the satirist, the grotesqe writer does not analyze and instruct in terms of right and wrong, or true and false, nor does he attempt to distinguish between these. On the contrary, he is concerned to demonstrate their inseparability. The grotesque writer would present ludicrous smallness and gross evil as being one, indistinguishable, and strive for a reaction in which laughter and anger figure...with equal force...The message of the grotesque is that the world is now a vale of tears, now a circus [and that they] are one.

-- Philip Thomson, The Grotesque

In Cheever's later suburban stories, it is the setting that becomes the main character, for it takes on an eerie power to overthrow the characters' lives and upset their plans. As Cheever portrays it in the villages of Remsen Park, Proxmire Manor, and B, the suburb becomes an underworld in which the condemned try desperately to escape unhappiness.

With their black humor and desolate endings, the later suburban stories approximate the style Irving Malin calls "new American Gothic" in which three essential images predominate: the haunted castle, the journey into the forest, and a distorted reflection of the environment (Malin 27). Translated into the world of Cheever's fiction, these images become the fully mechanized houses in which husbands write their breakfast orders on magic tablets; the swim home through one suburban pool after another which Neddy Merrill takes only to find himself locked out; and the bizarre insightfulness and psychosis of Gee-Gee in whom Charlie Folkestone sees his own fallen self.

The realism of the stories collected in The Housebreaker of Shady Hill slowly began to give way to a new style, less concerned with verisimilitude, more willing to experiment with aspects of the surreal. Those stories which Cheever published in Some People, Places and Things that Will Not Appear in my

Next Novel (1961) and The Brigadier and the Golf Widow (1964) are filled with dream, apocalyptic visions, and death.

The use of mystery to convey a sense of reality as febrile and unfathomable both enriched and endangered the stories, tipping them occasionally off balance and endowing them with moments of poetic brilliance. Increasingly, Cheever was experimenting with a type of magic realism in which comedy and violence were yoked together to convey the jarring discrepancies of daily life.

The proportion of characters in each story whose hold on reality was precarious created an extreme and isolating subjectivity, and the suburb became a dark fantasy garden, strange and defamiliarized.

It is not accidental that "The Music Teacher" (1959) takes place for the most part at night. In this story, the main character, Seton, has just one name, always a signal in Cheever's fiction that the story will be in a minor key. Seton arrives home from work to find a scene of utter devastation. One of his children is crying, one is pulling the stuffing out of a piece of furniture, and clouds of smoke are coming from

the kitchen where a leg of lamb is burning. There is something terrifying in the chaos, some force of hostility too complex and disguised for Seton to comprehend:

> The smell of smoke stayed in the air long after everyone but Seton had gone to bed. He sat alone in the living room recounting his problems to himself. He had been married ten years, and Jessica still seemed to him to possess an unusual loveliness of person and nature, but in the last year or two something grave and mysterious had come between them. The burned roast was not unusual; it was routine. She burned the chops, she burned the hamburgers, she even burned the turkey at Thanksgiving, and she seemed to burn the food deliberately, as ifit was a means of expressing her resentment to him....It was like some subterranean sea change, some sexual campaign or revolution stirring--unknown perhaps to her--beneath the shining and common appearance of things. (CS 414)

The horror of the unknown that lies beneath what we can perceive is a repetitive motif in these suburban stories so

that the pull is downwards into the hidden places of the earth, of the human body, and of the unconscious.

Despite Seton's efforts to soften his wife's rancor, and to lessen "the mountainous and deadly accrual of habit that [burdens] their relationship" (CS 415), nothing he does seems to work. Finally, a sympathetic friend advises Seton to take piano lessons as a diversion from his wretched life at home. Ready to try anything once, Seton drives across the village one evening to the home of the local piano teacher, an elderly woman named Miss Deming. There is something exotic about Miss Deming's house with its "little minarets and curtains of wooden beading, like a mistaken or at least mysterious nod to the faraway mosques and harems of bloody Islam" (CS 417). As Seton waits in a small ante-room for his first lesson, he feels absurdly nervous. He sees another man of about his age struggling to perfect a two-finger excercise and then, in his own lesson, he is assigned the same simple melody. For the next three weeks Miss Deming insists that he, too, practice this one monotonous drill for at least an hour a day.

The simple drill with its melody becomes a part of Seton's life. It plays through his mind during the business day, and, in the evenings, as he walks home from the train station, he hears it coming from the Thompsons' house and the Carmignoles', and he wonders if it is not his own memory of the tune which has become hynotically fixed in his ears.

Although he notices that Jessica and the girls leave the room when he practices the exercise, he is gratified that his home seems somehow less chaotic. Jessica is no longer cranky and unpredictable, the children are tidy, and the roasts no longer burned. Tenderly, Seton promises to accede to Jessica's plea that he ask Miss Deming for a new piece. At his next lesson he sees two bizarre young men smoking cigarettes in the old lady's kitchen. They are hoodlums with the slicked down hair and motorcycle boots of lawless youth. But Miss Deming is fond of them, they are "like sons" to her, and she leads Seton rather reluctantly out of the kitchen to the parlor for his lesson.

Gathering courage, Seton asks Miss Deming for a new piece, and confides that his wife hopes he might play something else for a while. But the teacher's response is instaneous and firm:

> "None of the gentlemen who come here have ever complained about my methods. If you're not satisfied, you don't have to come. Of course, Mr. Purvis went too far. Mrs. Purvis is still in the sanatorium, but I don't think the fault is mine. You want to bring her to her knees, don't you? Isn't that what you're here for? (CS 420)

Seton is stunned. Yet, as his mind registers the insane possibility that Miss Deming practices some sort of supernatural art designed to bring the shrewish wives of the suburb to their knees, his fingers go on playing "the insidious melody"(CS 420). With his new happiness at home to delight him, Seton goes to his fifth lesson to end his studies with Miss Deming. Oddly, the house is dark, the door open, and when Seton steps inside to call her name, he feels her shadowy presence everywhere. He returns to his own house and has been home only a short while when the police come to question him. Without explaining where they are going, they drive him to a dark crossroads where Miss Deming has been murdered:

> It was a scene for violence--bare, ugly, hidden away from any house, and with no one to hear her cries for help. She lay on the crossroads, like a witch. Her neck was broken, and her clothes were still disordered from her struggle with the great powers of death.(CS 422)

At the conclusion of "The Music Teacher," the reader is left in doubt. Who is responsible for Miss Deming's death? Are we to believe that it was the work of the two young hoodlums of whom she seemed so fond? In their hunting jackets and motorcycle boots, are they mysterious messengers of death?

Cheever is content to leave these questions unresolved, and, trust the incongruities of the situation itself to provide impact. Although the story is frail--it is really little more than a suburban ghost tale--there are elements in "The Music Teacher" which foreshadow Cheever's emerging fictional vision. He wanted to write in such a way that the suburban reality against which his characters framed their actions would seem untrustworthy, shifting, and unfathomable; he was obsessed with the notion that some truth was still there to be found, but that it had gotten misplaced or hidden, and that if it could be brought to light, there might still be time for some sort of redemption. The Puritan legacy he inherited made him a moralist in his fiction even as he slowly surrendered in his personal life to a multitude of ills. This discontinuity turned him towards a new narrative style that had to reflect the painful absence of rational or logical connections between our desires and the events of our daily life.

It is this absence of rationality within Proxmire Manor that causes Moses, the narrator of "The Death of Justina" (1960), to conclude that he lives in an absurd world:

> So help me God it gets more and more preposterous, it corresponds less and less to what I remember and what I expect as if

> the force of life were centrifugal and threw one further and further away from one's purest memories and ambitions....Fiction is art and art is the triumph over chaos (no less) and we can accomplish this only by the most vigilant exercise of choice, but in a world that changes more swiftly than we can perceive there is always the danger that our powers of selection will be mistaken and that the vision we serve will come to nothing. (CS 429)

As narrator, Moses' tone is edgy, anxious, wildly comic regarding his inability to piece together the incongruities of contemporary existence. His doctor has told him to give up drinking and smoking, an injunction which only increases his susceptibility to bad nerves. So when his wife's old cousin Justina comes to visit and then dies while drinking brandy on their living room sofa, Moses is unequal to what follows. After he hears the bad news from his wife, he decides to catch the first train home from the office. At this moment, his boss comes in with the urgent request that he write a commercial for a mouthwash named Elixircol. Moses protests, but his boss insists. In rebellion, Moses creates a comically inappropriate television advertisement and leaves the office. He arrives in Proxmire Manor and while waiting for his wife to

pick him up at the station, he gazes at the little town spread out on a hill above him:

> At Proxmire Manor I was the only passenger to get off the random, meandering, and profitless local that carried its shabby lights off into the dusk like some game-legged watchman or beadle making his appointed rounds. I went around to the front of the station to wait for my wife and to enjoy the traveler's fine sense of crisis. Above me on the hill were my home and the homes of my friends, all lighted and smelling of fragrant wood smoke like the temples in a sacred grove, dedicated to monogamy, feckless childhood, and domestic bliss but so like a dream that I felt the lack of viscera with much more than poignance--the absence of that inner dynamism we respond to in some European landscapes. In short, I was disappointed. (CS 432)

Moses' sense of unreality, of moving through a dream only intensifies after he is told by his family doctor that he lives in Zone B of Proxmire Manor where it is not only illegal to bury anyone but also illegal even to die. No one will come

to take away the dead body, and uncertain about what to do, Moses throws a sheet over the old lady so that his children will be protected from an unfortunate shock. But with the coming of night, the covered shape on the sofa seems to gain "power and stature" and "the rectitude of the place with its old furniture, flowers, paintings" is destroyed. (CS 434)

Enraged, Moses goes to the village mayor and threatens to bury the old lady himself in his front yard if the mayor will not give him a zoning permit. Reluctantly, the mayor concedes the point, and an hour later, a hearse from the local funeral parlor comes for the body. But that night, Moses has a dream, a surreal vision of a suburban underworld set in a vast supermarket in which music is playing and the ceiling is paved with fluorescent light--"brilliant, cheerful but, considering our prehistoric memories, a harsh link in the chain of light that binds us to the past" (CS 435). It is night; all the windows are covered, and within the store are thousands of shoppers who seem, as they push their carts, somehow "penitential and unsexed" (CS 436). On the shelves, the items are unmarked and without identification of any sort, and the frozen food bins are full of brown parcels in such odd shapes that it is impossible to tell whether they contain a frozen turkey or a Chinese dinner. The men at the check-out counters are lewd, unregenerate brutes, and as the shoppers approach them, they tear open whatever parcels the docile men

and women have collected:

> In every case the customer, at the sight of what he had chosen, showed all the symptoms of the deepest guilt; that force that brings us to our knees. Once their choice had been opened to their shame they were pushed--in some cases kicked--toward the door and beyond the door I saw dark water and heard a terrible noise of moaning and crying in the air. They waited at the door in groups to be taken away in some conveyance that I couldn't see. As I watched, thousands and thousands pushed their wagons through the market, made their careful and mysterious choices, and were reviled and taken away. (CS 436)

For Cheever, the meaning of this dream lay partly in his own growing awareness that for him the suburb was becoming a metaphor for spiritual blight and, more importantly, for social cruelty. His resistance to this perception had been powerful precisely because it was so dangerous for him to acknowledge: if the suburb was a social mechanism engineered to exclude the unsuitable, then his own secret life put him at risk. Always before, certain fictional strategems had

served his need for disguise. There were the quick endings in which problems were suddenly--if improbably--resolved. There were the two brothers: the good brother who knew how the world operated and took his pleasure without guilt and the bad brother who saw the dark side of things and for this reason had to be exorcised. Finally, there was the narrative voice of reasonableness, practicality, and good cheer that worked to imply Cheever's partisanship with the suburbanites and to make it clear that his sympathies were with the winners.

Clearly, this spiritual alignment necessitated a certain cruelty, a cruelty which surfaces in subtle ways. The characters in Cheever's fiction care intensely about appearance. Women especially must be beautiful if they are to be treated with respect. Homely women are either vilified as sour, spinsterish bluestockings or dismissed with condescending humor.

A more worrisome harshness of outlook appears occasionally as Cheever needlessly invents a mean-spirited ideology for Johnny Hake to confess in "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill." Johnny believes that to allow excessive pity for the unfortunate in life is to rob oneself unnecessarily of the world's delights:

> If there is anybody I detest, it is weak-minded sentimentalists--all those melancholy people who,

> out of an excess of sympathy for others, miss the thrill of their own essence and drift through life without identity, like a human fog, feeling sorry for everyone. The legless beggar in Times Square with his poor display of pencils, the rouged old lady in the subway who talks to herself, the exhibitionist in the public toilet, the drunk who has dropped on the subway stairs, do more than excite their pity; they are at a glance transformed into these unfortunates. Derelict humanity seems to trample over their unrealized souls, leaving them at twilight in a condition closely resembling the scene of a prison riot. Disappointed in themselves, they are always ready to be disappointed for the rest of us, and they will build whole cities, whole creations, firmaments and principalities, of tear-wet disappointment.(CS 264)

Cheever had to place himself behind narrators such as Johnny Hake because secretly he knew that he was one of the pitiful souls--"the drunk who has dropped on the subway stairs--" who must take care to sound as much like one of the elect as possible. Should his secrets be found out--his alcoholism and his attraction to men as well as women--he would be "taken away in some conveyance" just as the shoppers

> whole creations, firmaments and principalities, of tear-wet disappointment.("Housebreaker 314)

Cheever had to place himself behind narrators such as Johnny Hake because secretly he knew that he was one of the pitiful souls--"the drunk who has dropped on the subway stairs--" who must take care to sound as much like one of the elect as possible. Should his secrets be found out--his alcoholism and his attraction to men as well as women--he would be "taken away in some conveyance" just as the shoppers were in the dream Moses had in "The Death of Justina."

Moses' perception in the dream that he is both one of the shoppers and yet "withdrawn" is precisely Cheever's relation to the suburb itself. For Cheever, the most dreaded consequence of courageous self disclosure was exclusion, the fate which Moses, the narrator of "The Death of Justina," brings upon himself. For when he goes to the office the next morning and finds the Elixircol commercial on his desk with a peremptory command to do it again, he writes another lewd and unusable version. When it is returned to him on the day following with the note, "Do or you'll be dead," he is suddenly very tired, so tired that he simply puts a sheet of paper in his typewriter, types out the twenty-third psalm, gives it to the office messenger boy, and goes home.

The nature of Moses' rebellion has to do with what

the World" 604). When Moses finds that neither the wording of a zoning regulation nor the substance of advertising copy is responsive to genuine human need, he suddenly refuses to use language dishonestly. Repeatedly, in Cheever's later fiction, there is a pained realization that language itself has become either too formulaic or too arcane to be a servicable means of communication. In "The Brigadier and the Golf Widow" Charlie Pastern can only express his rage at the Communists through three sentences which he uses in response to any discussion of foreign policy: "Bomb Cuba! Bomb Berlin! Let's throw a little nuclear hardware at them and show them who's boss" (CS 589).

This brooding concern with the breakdown of language becomes obsessive in "A Vision of the World" (1962) which opens with its nameless first person narrator spading up his garden and coming upon a small, round can buried about two feet below the surface. The can contains a note on lined paper which says, "I, Nils Jugstrom, promise myself that if I am not a member of the Gory Brook Country Club by the time I am twenty-five years old I will hang myself" (604). It is the unlikeliness of the message that startles the narrator, the forlorn yet original imagination that could conceive of simultaneously declaring and concealing such a vow. In every part of the narrator's life, he suddenly finds that there are no suitable words to fit the suburban reality he now

perceives. At the supermarket, he looks about in bewilderment at the futuristic scene.

He next sees a man with a grocery list that looks like an ancient scroll. When the man notices that the narrator is interested in his list, he holds it to his chest "like a prudent card player" (605). If grocery lists are treated as though they were classified documents, and there are no traditional words with which to describe new consumer products, the world becomes indecipherable and alien. And, in truth, the narrator's suburban world lacks all forms of coherence. His garden seems to him a microcosm of the world's insane violence: Black ants carry the corpses of red ants off the field; a robin flies past pursued by two jays; a cat stalks a sparrow, and a copperhead works itself "out of the last length of its dark winter skin" (605). There is no way the narrator can reconcile these images of violence with the seeming tranquility of his quiet front yard, and he finds himself at a loss: Here was lethal venom, as much a part of the earth as running water in the brook, but I seemed to have no space for it in my considerations" (605).

The disjunction between appearance and reality becomes the source of nervous illness for the narrator, and still the problem of decoding the confusion is complicated. At one moment, the suburban reality is far more terrifying than it appears. Yet with startling speed, the balance can reverse

so that the appearance seems far more agitated and distressed than the reality warrants. In a brilliant passage, the narrator's wife wonders why her anguish seems so out of place in the midst of suburban order:

> "I just have this terrible feeling that I'm a character in a television situation comedy," she said. "I mean, I'm nice looking, I'm well-dressed, I have humorous and attractive children, but I have this terrible feeling that I'm in black-and-white and that I can be turned off by anybody...." My wife is often sad because her sadness is not a sad sadness, sorry because her sorrow is not a crushing sorrow. She grieves because her grief is not an acute grief, and when I tell her that this sorrow over the inadequacies of her sorrow may be a new hue in the spectrum of human pain, she is not consoled. (606)

Although the narrator does not fully understand her meaning, he is grateful to his wife for stating clearly that "the externals of her life had the quality of a dream" (CS 514).

The possibility that suburban life itself is as insubstantial as a dream is enhanced that night when the

narrator and his wife go to a dance at the club. Watching the wild dancing of his middle-aged friends, and musing that one of the dancers is a man named Pinky Townsend who is out "on fifty thousand dollars' bail for stock market manipulation," he wonders whether they are all "dancing on the grave of social coherence" (CS 514). At the end of the evening, he goes home, turns on the television, and hears a commercial for a product that can stop wet fur odor. The commercial seems to him "a part of the dream world that must be turned off"(CS 515). Disgruntled, he goes to sleep to have the first of three dreams in which he is able to speak a strange language.

In the first dream, he is on a foreign island in the Pacific with a group of men. He sees signs in all the stores written in a strangely garbled English. When he goes to a restaurant, he has a struggle with the language, but it is "an informed struggle:"

> I seemed to have studied the language before coming ashore. I distinctly remembered putting together a sentence when the waiter came up to the table. "Porpozec ciebie nie prosze dorzanin albo zyolpocz ciwego," I said. The waiter smiled and complimented me, and when I woke from the dream, the fact of the language made

> the island in the sun, its population,
> and its museum real, vivid, and enduring.
> I thought with longing of the quiet and
> friendly natives and the easy pace of
> their lives. (CS 516)

In the second dream, he is standing at a window of a Nantucket cottage facing out onto the beach. He sees a priest or a bishop who is carrying a crozier and wearing "the miter, cope, soutane, chasuble, and alb for high votive Mass" (CS 516). As the bishop sees him in the window, he calls out the same strange sentence in greeting.

The third dream takes place on a football field. The narrator is playing touch football, and when his team wins, a large, blonde woman leads a cheer with the same words. The narrator does not understand what the sentence means literally, but it "has the excitement of discovery for him" (CS 516).

The opacity of the language is part of the narrator's pleasure. It is less threatening for him to know that he doesn't know the precise meaning of the words than to live in his suburb with the awareness that the vocabulary of standard English is inadequate to represent a reality which has become more surreal than the world he encounters in his dreams. After the last of his dreams, he wakes and goes downstairs to have

breakfast, but he finds that his kitchen is "a part of dreamland:"

> With its pink, washable walls, chilling lights, built-in television (where prayers were being said), and artificial potted plants, it made me nostalgic for my dream, and when my wife passed me the stylus and Magic Tablet on which we write our breakfast orders, I wrote, "Porpozec ciebie nie prosze dorzanin albo zyolpocz ciwego." (CS 517)

Fearful that he is having a nervous breakdown, the narrator goes to Florida for a rest and begins to write the chronicle of these strange hallucinations. But the mysterious phrase in the unknown language follows him southward, and that night he has still another dream:

> I dream that I see a pretty woman kneeling in a field of wheat. Her light-brown hair is full and so are the skirts of her dress. Her clothing seems old-fashioned--it seems before my time--and I wonder how I can know and feel so tenderly toward a stranger who is dressed in clothing that my grandmother might have worn. And yet she seems real--more real than the Tamiami

> Trail four miles to the east, with its Smorgorama and Giganticburger stands, more real than the back streets of Sarasota. I do not ask her who she is. I know what she will say. But then she smiles and starts to speak before I can turn away. "Porpozec ciebie..." she begins. (CS 517)

He wakes to hear the sound of rain and sits up suddenly in bed to say the words, "Valor! Love! Virtue! Compassion! Splendor! Kindness! Wisdom! Beauty!" The words seem to have "the colors of earth"(CS 517). They comfort him as the words of the twenty-third psalm comforted Moses in "The Death of Justina." In Cheever's suburban world, the only words left that retain intrinsic beauty and the capacity to solace human loneliness are words of incantation and prayer.

It is the harshness of the surrounding reality that causes the narrators of these suburban fictions to seek refuge in a magical language or in a world of fantasy. The narrator of "The Chimera," a story written in 1961 which is slight yet still indicative, summons his "chimera" each evening as he barbecues burgers for his lunatic wife Zena. The chimera is a beautiful young woman named Olga who has an oval face, olive-colored skin, and hair that is dark, fragrant, and straight. She is loving and gentle, and though the narrator

is perfectly aware that she is merely a fantasy, she comforts him as he struggles to live with Zena.

Cheever tended to write about women in a strangely dualistic way. They are either beautiful as they stand in the evening light holding a huge bunch of flowers from the garden or, like Zena, they are completely demented shrews dedicated to perfecting the miser of their husbands. The hapless narrator of "The Chimera" tries to make Zena happy, but his efforts are to no avail. Her disappointment with their modest suburban life has become entrenched and so bitter that she contemplates murder:

> That night, when I was washing the dishes, I heard Zena speak to me from the kitchen door. I turned and saw her standing there, holding my straight razor...."You'd better not leave things like this lying around," she shouted. "If you know what's good for you, you'd better not leave things like this lying around. There are plenty of women in the world who would cut you to ribbons for what I've endured....(CS 475)

It is the sheer madness of the scene that a reader is left with, the grotesque unlikeliness of a wife threatening her pitifully uxorious husband in this way.

There is peril everywhere in the suburbs of Cheever's later fiction. The sense of menace is so pervasive that they seem as frightening in their pastoral perfection as the urban slums of Dreiser's imagination. Cheever's characters move through their green wasteland with strangely stoic suffering until--like Charlie Pastern in "The Brigadier and the Golf Widow"--they cry out, "Dear Jesus, when will it ever end" (CS 509)?

It is typical of Cheever's technique in these stories that he presents characters first as stock types--the buffoon, the drinker, the commuter, the coyly lecherous housewife--and only at the last minute reveals the depth of their suffering. This sudden glimpse of the character's spiritual anguish works to catch the reader off-guard and ensnare his or her sympathy before the story's ending which usually portrays the main character confronting a new sign of material or psychological loss.

By the conclusion of "The Brigadier and the Golf Widow," Charlie Pastern has run through his inherited wealth and accrued unmanagable debts, had a rather inconsequential affair with a lonely houseife named Mrs. Flannagan, and--against his better judgment--allowed himself to be persuaded to give her a key to his bomb shelter. Mrs. Pastern is predictably enraged when she hears about Charlie's transgression through a neighborhood cleaning woman. Together, they had drawn up a

to his bomb shelter. Mrs. Pastern is predictably enraged when she hears about Charlie's transgression through a neighborhood cleaning woman. Together, they had drawn up a list so selective regarding who should gain admittance to their shelter in the event of nuclear catastrophe that even Charlie's mother had been excluded. So it is inconceivable to Mrs. Pastern that her husband should betray her in this way. By the story's end, both the Pasterns and the Flannigans have had to move out of the suburb and adjust to reduced circumstances: Charlie Pastern is in jail; Mrs. Pastern is living in the Bronx with her son, and the Flannigans have divorced. In the final scene, the new tenant of the Pasterns' house sees a thinly clad woman standing out in the back yard gazing at the bomb shelter while snow gathers on her shoulders. It is Mrs. Flannigan who has come back to the suburb simply to gaze at the shelter which no longer protects her or the Pasterns from destruction. Seeing the strange woman, the new tenant calls a neighbor, finds out that it must be Mrs. Flannigan, and quickly sends a maid out to tell the intruder to leave. The harshness of the suburban world is soundless, and as invisible as the underground shelter. Charlie's mismanagement and Mrs. Flannigan's sexual liaisons have caused both couples to be made outcasts, the most dire of punishments in Cheever's suburban world.

In the memoir of her father which Susan Cheever wrote, Home Before Dark, she includes a revealing moment in

which Cheever's yearning for home is made clear:

> My father liked to tell a story about my younger brother Fred. When Fred was a little boy, we lived in a small house called Beechwood in Scarborough, New York, about twenty-five miles up the Hudson River from New York City. Once, at twilight after a long summer day, my father was standing outside the house under the big elm tree that shaded the flagstones in front of the door. Fred came back from playing with some friends, worn out and tired too, and when he saw Daddy standing there he ran across the grass and threw his little boy's body into his father's arms.
>
> "I want to go home, Daddy," he said, "I want to go home."
>
> Of course he was home, just a few feet from the front door, in fact. But that didn't make any difference, as my father well understood. We all want to go home, he would say when he told this story. We all do. (Home Before Dark 10-11)

Struggling against his own yearning to remain embedded

in a safe community, Cheever wrote one of his most brilliant stories about a character who makes it his mission to "teach" suburbanites that their lives are narrow and purposeless.

"The Scarlet Moving Van" (1959) is set in the unincorporated township of B where life is "unprecedentedly comfortable and tranquil:"

> B was exclusively for the felicitous. The housewives kissed their husbands tenderly in the morning and passionately at nightfall. In nearly every house there were love, graciousness, and high hopes. The schools were excellent, the roads were smooth, the drains and other services were ideal, and one spring evening at dusk an immense scarlet moving van with gold lettering on its sides came up the street and stopped in the front of the Marple house which had been empty then for three months. (CS 359)

The scarlet moving van which is decorated like a circus cart to disguise "the true sorrowfulness of wandering" (CS 359) is bringing the belongings of a new couple who are moving next door to Charlie and Martha Folkestone. The new residents of B are named Gee-Gee and Peaches. They are never given a surname. Their first names suggest lightness and

in truth, Gee-Gee does have a certain blond handsomeness; there is something both "angelic and menacing" (CS 360) about his face for he has "the earnest and contained look of those who are a little hard of hearing or a little stupid" (CS 360). Peaches, his rosily beautiful wife, is warm and good hearted.

With neighborly solicitude, Charlie and Martha Folkestone invite the new couple over for drinks. At first, the evening seems pleasant enough, but then Gee-Gee suddenly breaks into the conversation:

> "God, but you're stuffy people," he said.
>
> "Oh no, Gee-Gee!" Peaches said. "Not on our first night!"
>
> "You've had too much to drink, Gee-Gee," Charlie said.
>
> "Like hell I have," said Gee-Gee. He bent over and began to unlace his shoes. "I haven't had half enough."
>
> "Please, Gee-Gee, please," Peaches said.
>
> "I have to teach them, honey," Gee-Gee said. They've got to learn."
>
> Then he stood up and with the cunning and dexterity of a drunk, got out of most of his clothing before anyone could stop him.
>
> "Get out of here," Charlie said.

"The pleasure's all mine, neighbor," said Gee-Gee. He kicked over a hammered-brass umbrella stand on his way out the door.

"Oh, I'm frightfully sorry!" Peaches said. "I feel terribly about this!"

"Don't worry, my dear," Martha said. "He's probably very tired, and we've all had too much to drink."

"Oh, no," Peaches said. "It always happens. Everywhere. We've moved eight times in the last eight years, and there's never been anyone to say goodbye to us. Not a soul. Oh, he was a beautiful man when I first knew him! You never saw anyone so fine and strong and generous. They called him the Greek God at college. That's why he's called Gee-Gee." (CS 360-361)

Gradually it becomes evident that Gee-Gee cannot or will not change, that his obsession to "teach" his neighbors something requires him to disrupt every social occasion that he attends. After a few drinks his whole character seems to alter, and he changes from an affable and likeable suburbanite into an intolerable crank:

> No one had ever seen anything like it. He undressed at the Bilkers'. At the Levys' he drop-kicked a bowl of soft cheese onto the ceiling. He danced the Highland Fling in his under-pants, set fire to wastebaskets, and swung on the Townsends' chandelier--that famous chandelier. Inside of six weeks, there was not a house in B where he was welcome. (CS 362)

Out of some indefinable sympathy, Charlie Folkestone is touched by his new neighbor's plight. Just as Gee-Gee is determined to teach the inhabitants of B some mysterious truth, Charlie Folkestone finds himself trying to save Gee-Gee from himself. He pleads with Gee-Gee to stop drinking, or to see a psychiatrist, but Gee-Gee only insists that he has "to play it out," that he has to teach them. He seems utterly immovable in his bizarre dedication, but then, when he reflects on the suffering it costs him, he throws back his head and sobs, "Oh, Jesus..." (CS 363). Charlie is strangely touched, and feels suddenly that he understands what is behind Gee-Gee's outbursts:

> Charlie turned away. It seemed, at that instant, that Gee-Gee had heard, from some

wilderness of his own, the noise of a distant horn that prophesied the manner and the hour of his death. There seemed to be some tremendous validity to the drunken man. Folkestone felt an upheaval in his spirit. He felt he understood the drunken man's message; he had always sensed it. It was at the bottom of their friendship. Gee-Gee was an advocate for the lame, the diseased, the poor, for those who through no fault of their own live out their lives in misery and pain. To the happy and the wellborn and the rich he had this to say--that for all their affection, their comforts, and their privileges, they would not be spared the pangs of anger and lust and the agonies of death. He only meant for them to be prepared for the blow when the blow fell. But was it not possible to accept this truth without having him dance a jig in your living room? He spoke from some vision of the suffering in life, but was it necessary to suffer oneself in order to accept his message? It seemed so. (CS 363)

There is no more Charlie can do. In less than a year, the

scarlet moving van returns to take the possessions of Gee-Gee and Peaches out of B, the suburb which Cheever likens to another sort of hill town "in that the ailing, the disheartened and the poor could not ascend the steep moral path that formed its natural defense..." (CS 359).

Time goes by. New neighbors move into the house next door, and eventually Charlie hears through local gossip that Gee-Gee has broken his hip and that he is living in the town of Y. Half uncertain why he is going to so much trouble, Charlie drives over one Sunday afternoon to see his old neighbor. He finds Gee-Gee alone and incapacitated. In a masochism hardly comprehensible, he has sent Peaches and the children off for a holiday in Nassau. He manages as best he can by getting around the house in a children's wagon, a macabre miniature version of the scarlet moving van that appears in twilight to cart away the possessions of those unfortunates who must leave the suburb of B. Although Charlie offers to get a nurse to look after things, Gee-Gee only replies, "Don't worry. I have my guardian angel" (CS 365).

There is something terrifying in Gee-Gee's situation, as if he had almost willed his solitude, set it up so that he could be drunken and crippled in an isolated house. Peaches is far too kind to have left him of her own volition.

Charlie stays later than he should. It has begun to snow. The afternoon is darkening, yet he feels uneasy about leaving

Gee-Gee in such lonely helplessness. But his own family is waiting, the snowfall is becoming heavy, and the trip home will be difficult.

After a nerve-racking drive, Charlie arrives at his own home which seems intensely peaceful and ordered. While he is playing recorder trios with his children, the phone rings. It is Gee-Gee. He is in trouble. After Charlie left him this afternoon, he managed to fall out of the wagon. It has taken him two hours to get to the phone. He needs Charlie to drive back and rescue him. Charlie is the only friend he has, the only person who cares enough about him to come.

For a minute, Charlie holds the telephone receiver indecisively. The moment is fraught, one of those moments Martin Buber sees as a spiritual crisis in which the decision we make will be a secret litmus test of our moral worth. As such, Cheever expands the moment through a paragraph of extended description, freezing the frame as Charlie stands doubtfully with the receiver in his hand:

> It must have been the strangeness of the look on Charlie's face that made the baby scream. The little girl picked him up in her arms and stared, as did the other boy, at their father. They seemed to know the whole picture, every detail of it, and they looked at him calmly, as if they were expecting

> him to make some decision that had nothing to do with the continuing of a pleasant evening in a snowbound house--but a decision that would have a profound effect on their knowledge of him and on their final happiness. Their looks were, he thought, clear and appealing, and whatever he did would be final. (CS 366)

Then, he hangs up. The phone rings once again, and when Charlie doesn't answer it, no one questions him. He makes a drink "to diminish the feeling that some emotional explosion had taken place, that some violence had shaken the air. He did not know what he had done or how to cope with his conscience" (CS 367).

Unable to confide in his wife, or absolve his guilt even after he hears that the local firemen had come right over to get Gee-Gee safely into bed, Charlie begins to drink. In a slow metamorphosis, he becomes a saturnine copy of Gee-Gee: sullen, suspicious, and rude. In the end, he, too, loses his job, and the Folkestones have to move and begin "their wanderings, like Gee-Gee and Peaches, in the scarlet and gold van" (CS 368).

Once again in "The Scarlet Moving Van," Cheever is using the device of brothers, but the two men--Charlie and Gee-Gee-- are brothers not by birth but by a secret sharing

of some moral dilemma that binds them to the same fate. Only this time, it is not the "good" brother who batters down his shadow; rather, it is the unbalanced, Puritanic preacher of damnation who manages to destroy the happiness of the well adjusted suburbanite.

Like many fine stories, "The Scarlet Moving Van," retains a certain opacity. It is open to different readings which depend on Cheever's intention regarding Gee-Gee. If Gee-Gee is meant to be seen as an inarticulate lout who is so expert at inducing guilt that he forces anyone who cares for him into a fatal sense of sin, the meaning of the story becomes a warning: we must protect ourselves from those who through their own inability to enjoy life would spitefully destroy the well being of others. In this case, the guilt that Gee-Gee's suffering inspires must be resisted, and Charlie Folkestone's destruction results from a certain lack of moral clarity that has allowed him to become entangled with a destructive force. If, however, Gee-Gee is more a lost soul whose loneliness and mental anguish must be taken seriously, Charlie Folkestone's refusal to aid him becomes the sin which condemns him to expulsion from suburban safety.

The mysteriousness of the story only enhances its power to haunt the memory of a reader. There is something awful in Gee-Gee's fallen state, something mythical in the transformations he undergoes from the easy-going, suburban

affability of his daytime personality to the self-destructive rebelliousness that takes over at night. This split personality mirrors the dual nature of the Greek God Adonis, and Peaches confides sadly to the Folkestones that she does not "know what had happened to her Adonis" (CS 363).

Peaches, of course, is Aphrodite: "blond and warm, with a low-cut dress and a luminous front" (CS 360). In the myth, even Aphrodite's love cannot save Adonis from having to spend half of each seasonal cycle with Persephone in Hades. And, it is the blood of Adonis who is killed by a wild boar that flowers into crimson blossoms each year. Gee-Gee then becomes a kind of scapegoat who must be sacrificed again and again to safeguard the inhabitants of B from becoming "infected with unhappiness or discontent" (CS 359).

The story also touches upon an idea Cheever returns to repeatedly in his fiction: at the moment when innocence is lost, an individual's identity seems to melt down in such a way that he begins to resemble the person whose sins or illness somehow ensnared him. Underneath the story, at its heart, is the terror of finding oneself an outcast, of being set upon by the pack, of losing one's hold on reality or on oneself through some quiet surrender to moral contamination. The horror of finding oneself cast out of suburban safety into a realm of darkness and disorientation connects the theme of

"The Scarlet Moving Van" to the dominant idea in "The Swimmer," one of Cheever's most widely anthologized stories.

Neddy Merrill, the protagonist of "The Swimmer," decides one Sunday afternoon to swim home from a pool party. His passage through one suburban pool after another becomes a journey through his failed life, a journey which progresses through each level of suburban damnation until Neddy comes to the final torment.

Cheever often spoke of the way he worked on this story with especial care, revising it, shortening it from a novella to a story of roughly twelve pages. This condensation represented a literary risk, for within the story all the demarcations representing our usual sense of time collapse. In the few hours of Neddy's long swim, the season changes from high summer to leafless autumn, and Neddy himself ages strangely. As the story opens, we see him as a man in his prime, sporty and so high-spirited that he slides down the banister of his staircase and then stops to give "the bronze backside of Aphrodite on the hall table a smack" (CS 603) before jogging into the dining room towards the smell of coffee. Neddy's youthfulness expresses his delight in all the pleasures of his life: his wife Lucinda, his four pretty daughters, and his inclusion within the social fabric of suburban life.

In the opening scene of the story, Neddy is at a pool

party, sitting with one hand in the clear, green water of the Westerhazy's pool and the other holding a glass of gin. Lucinda is sitting nearby in a deck chair, and around him is laughter and the usual Sunday afternoon's contented remorse for the excesses of the night before:

> It was one of those midsummer Sundays when everyone sits around saying, "I drank too much last night." You might have heard it whispered by the parishioners leaving church, heard it from the lips of the priest himself, struggling with his cassock in the vestiarium, heard it from the golf links and the tennis courts, heard it from the wildlife preserve where the leader of the Audubon group was suffering from a terrible hangover. "I drank too much," said Donald Westerhazy. "We all drank too much," said Lucinda Merrill. "It must have been the wine," said Helen Westerhazy. "I drank too much of that claret." (CS 603)

The tone is easy-going and acceptant, and in a desire to celebrate the beauty of the summer day, Neddy Merrill suddenly decides that he will swim home through the chain of suburban pools that connect the Westerhazy's house to his home in

Bullet Park only eight miles away. With the excitement of an explorer, Neddy plots his route:

> 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. (CS 604)

His swim will be legendary, an obeisance to a country so generous in its cerulean waters. At first, all goes well. At each pool, Neddy is welcomed warmly, given a drink, and a chance to rest and observe the customs of his country. Most of the pools have noisy parties going on; friends are drinking, playing, passing the summer Sunday in sociable enjoyment. But gradually, the mood of Neddy's journey begins to darken. A summer storm chills him and shakes some leaves from a tree. Around him, Neddy sees orange and red maple leaves lying on the ground, but he cannot remember summer's having passed into autumn. His route requires a short portage across Route 242, and while he is standing barefoot in the litter beside the highway, he hears derisive jeers as cars

speed past. It takes him fifteen minutes to cross to safety, and once, as he waits, a beer can is thrown at him.

Suddenly fatigued, he begins the last leg of his journey only to find that one of the pools on his route--the Welchers'-- has been inexplicably drained. Going around to the front of the house to investigate, Neddy sees a "For Sale" sign and realizes all at once that he has not seen the Welchers for a very long time. This break in his swim--and in his memory--disquiets him still further, and he wonders whether he has so disciplined his mind "in the repression of unpleasant facts that he [has) damaged his sense of the truth (CS 607). His sense of disorientation increases as he tries to make his way through the murky, overcrowded water of the public pool. It is hard for him to believe now that it was only this morning that he had swum at the Westerhazy's. As he wearily tries to lift himself out of the public pool, the lifeguards yell at him to get out, that he is not allowed to swim without an identification disc.

His route carries him to the Biswangers' pool where he is sure he will get a warm welcome and a strong drink, both of which are now necessary to restore him to good spirits. But, he has not reckoned with the resentment of the Biswangers at the way Neddy and Lucinda have snubbed them in the past, regretting their repeated invitations to dinner, despising them for their gauche habit of talking about money and telling

dirty jokes in mixed company. Even the Biswangers' catering man treats Neddy rudely, and Neddy suddenly realizes that in this country where the degree of obsequiousness among bartenders is a barometer of social status, he must somehow have fallen from favor.

Confused, Neddy heads for the last two pools on his route. He must enter the Halloran estate, and, once again, abide by the customs of the country for the Hallorans are immensely wealthy and eccentric elderly suburbanites who delight in being considered radical and choose to swim in the nude. Politely, Neddy removes his swimming trunks and while he is standing naked, Mrs. Halloran says kindly that she has been so sorry to hear of all his misfortunes:

> "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."
>
> "Yes," Mrs. Halloran sighed. "Yes..." Her voice filled the air with an unseasonable melancholy and Ned spoke briskly."Thank you for the swim."
>
> "Well, have a nice trip," said Mrs. Halloran.
>
> Beyond the hedge he pulled on his trunks and

> fastened them. They were loose and he wondered if, during the afternoon, he could have lost some weight. He was cold and he was tired and the naked Hallorans and their dark water had depressed him. (CS 609)

Although Neddy doesn't understand the "misfortunes" Mrs. Halloran is alluding to, the reader begins to suspect the gravity of Neddy's situation and the dark import of his inability to grasp the meaning of his strange journey.

Nearly at the finish of his swim, he must pass through the pool of one of his previous mistresses. Even her reception of him is puzzling: "If you've come to borrow money again, I won't lend you another cent," she says in greeting, and when he explains his presence, she responds bitterly, "Christ, will you ever grow up" (CS 611)? Worse still, she refuses him a drink because she is not alone, and as Neddy looks around, he sees the silhouette of a young man in the bathhouse:

> Looking over his shoulder he saw, in the lighted bathouse, a young man. Going out onto the dark lawn he smelled chrysanthemums or marigolds--some stubborn autumnal fragrance--on the night air, strong as gas. Looking overhead he saw that the stars had come out, but why should he seem

> to see Andromeda, Cepheus, and Cassiopeia? What had become of the constellations of midsummer? He began to cry.
>
> It was probably the first time in his adult life that he had ever cried, certainly the first time in his life that he had felt so miserable, cold, tired, and bewildered. He could not understand the rudeness of the caterer's barkeep or the rudeness of a mistress who had come to him on her knees and showered his trousers with tears. He had swum too long, he had been immersed too long.... (CS 612)

When he finally arrives home, he sees that the house is dark and that no one is home. Futilely, he tries to grasp the meaning of this. Has Lucinda stayed for supper at the Esterhazys'? Have his daughters gone to meet her there? Cursing the cook and maid for being so stupid as to lock him out, he suddenly realizes that for a long while they have had no servants. Looking up, he notices the drain pipe hanging down over the front door and concludes that it must have fallen down in the storm. Alone and exhausted, he pounds on the door, tries to force it open with his shoulder until he realizes suddenly that the house is utterly empty.

Neddy Merrill's journey has brought him home to a

"haunted castle," a symbol of his worst imagining. For Neddy, his arrival marks an end, a confrontation with the emptiness of the suburban dream.

For Cheever, however, "The Swimmer" represents both intellectual and artistic courage. Daring to leave behind the constraints of realism, Cheever allowed himself to reveal the clattering emptiness of life in Bullet Park. This honesty was not won without pain. Cheever's drinking problem was becoming increasingly disabling, his personal life was more and more complicated, and his mood was sinking steadily into deep depression. In this frame of mind, he began the novel, Bullet Park, which would fully delineate the latent violence both in the suburb and in Cheever's own soul. Yet, those perceptions which the final suburban stories limn so masterfully seemed always too frail to support the heavier structure of a fully developed novel. In compensation, Cheever invented the bizarre plot of Bullet Park which worked only to distract readers from the dark humor, and the power of Cheever's sense of grotesque. Cheever was both a tragic and a triumphant example of Frank O'Connor's epigram: "The saddest thing about the short story is the eagerness with which those who write it best try to escape from it. It is a lonely art, and they too, are lonely" (The Lonely Voice 110).

Chapter Seven

Bullet Park: A Darkening World

> "The modern writer specializes in grotesque facts, and he cannot compete with the news, with 'life itself.' Perhaps he should begin to think of interesting himself in something other than the grotesque. There is good reason to think that absurdities are travelling in two directions, from art into life and from life into art. We cannot continue to ignore Oscar Wilde's law: 'Nature imitates Art.'"
>
> --Saul Bellow, The Perils of Pleasing the Public

> "What is becoming evident in your work is a sort of apocalyptic poetry as if you were carrying well observed suburban life into some new dimension where everything is a little cockeyed and on the point of being exploded into a mushroom cloud."
>
> --Letter to Cheever from Malcolm Cowley, 10 Feb. 1961

Within the town limits of Bullet Park, there is no longer any sense of delight. Whereas the inhabitants of Shady Hill could take pleasure in their parties and golf games, their barbecues and gardening, the citizens of Bullet Park live in a world of physical and spiritual danger. A commuter gets sucked under the wheels of the morning train and simply disappears. A father nearly murders his son on a miniature golf course; although the boy is not physically injured, he falls into such a severe depression that he cannot leave his bed for the next few weeks. A terrorist decides to crucify one

of the inhabitants as an example to the world that Bullet Park is a symbol of moral corruption.

It is no accident that the real estate agent who shows Paul Hammer around Bullet Park is named Mr. Hazzard. The people who choose to settle in this suburb are at risk. The atmosphere is heavy with dishonesty, and after welcoming Paul Hammer to Bullet Park, and saying, "We hope you'll like it well enough to join us here," Mr. Hazzard adds that he does not happen to live in the suburb (4).

Hammer and his wife Marietta purchase the old Heathcup place, and begin to be seen around Bullet Park. While they are chatting with the priest one Sunday morning after church, they are introduced to Eliot Nailles:

> "We're the Hammers," the stranger said to the priest.
>
> Nailles did not think this funny, anticipating the fact that almost everyone else in the neighborhood would. How many hundreds or perhaps thousands of cocktail parties would they have to live through, side by side: Hammer and Nailles. Nailles claimed not to be a superstitious man but he did believe in the mysterious power of nomenclature. (19)

Driving away from the church, Eliot Nailles forgets about the Hammers. His life in Bullet Park is happy. He loves his wife Nellie, his son Tony, and his old dog named Tessie. For the most part, he can reconcile himself to the reductiveness of his lucrative job as a chemist who merchandises a mouthwash called Spang. But, one evening, as he is playing miniature golf with his sixteen-year old son Tony, the boy declares that he wants to drop out of school. Father and son argue bitterly, Nailles becomes preachy and moralistic, and in retaliation Tony scornfully ridicules Nailles's conception of the good, suburban life. Goaded beyond endurance, Nailles raises his putter to bring it down on Tony's head, but the boy runs off into the night.

The next morning Tony is too depressed to leave his bed. The general practitioners and psychiatrists of Bullet Park who are summoned charge huge fees and accomplish nothing. When Nellie Nailles hears from her cleaning woman that there is a guru in Bullet Park named Swami Rutuola who is willing to attempt a spiritual cure, Nellie arranges for him to come to Tony's bedside.

With gentleness, and mantras of rather simple-minded cheer, the Swami is able to restore Tony's good spirits; but the crisis of Tony's depressive illness has left Nailles himself at risk. His vision of Bullet Park seems to have undergone a strange transformation in which events are

loosened from comprehensible explanations of causation, and the town which had once seemed so pleasant now assumes an aspect of threat.

Invited to a dinner party at Hammer's home, Nailles watches as Hammer's wife Marietta becomes drunk and abusive to her husband. Soon after, as Nailles is waiting with Hammer on the station platform for the morning commuter train into the city, they both see an acquaintance sucked under the wheels of the New York-Chicago express. On the morning after this incident, Nailles finds himself suddenly unable to complete his routine commute to work:

> The next morning was dark and rainy. He overslept and missed the express train that usually took him to his office. The local that he traveled on made twenty-two stops between Bullet Park and Grand Central Station. The dirty train windows and the overcast sky seemed to have eclipsed his spirits....
>
> The train stopped at Tremont Point, Greenacres, Lascalles, Meadowvale and Clear Haven. The trip seemed intolerable, but why? He had made it a thousand times. Why should this link between his home and his office seem torturous? His breathing was heavy, his

> palms were wet, there was a quaking feeling in his gut and the dark rain seemed to beat upon his heart. When the train reached Longbrook, Nailles suddenly grabbed his raincoat, pushed his way past the oncoming passengers and left the car. The train coasted on and he found himself alone in a suburban railway station at half past eight in the morning. (62)

The image of Nailles standing by himself in a strange town half way between Bullet Park and the city suggests the peculiar dread of separation that is so characteristic of Cheever's suburban fiction. It is as if by stepping aside even momentarily, a character risks the awareness of an isolation that is existentially desolating.

After finding himself unable any longer to successfully "bridge or link the disparate environments and rhythms of his world" (62), Eliot Nailles begins to buy tranquilizers from a suburban dealer in order to safely navigate the morning commute. The pills make him dull and absentminded, but he is able to ride the 7:46 without panic.

Like Eliot Nailles, Paul Hammer, the deranged villain of the novel, is also addicted to mind altering substances. When his depression becomes unbearable, he drinks heavily and searches for any room with daffodil yellow walls. Only in

rooms of this color can he regain the will to live. Outside of the yellow rooms, Hammer's misery is so intense that he becomes a nomad in the world, traveling from one international capital to another in a state of drunken torpor.

There is ample cause for Hammer's despair. Born illegitimately to a drunken, neglectful father and a frivolous, eccentric mother who believes that she can identify previous tenants of the hotel rooms she occupies simply from the psychic energy they leave behind, Hammer was raised by a grandmother. His surname of Hammer is no more than coincidental. Unwilling to give her grandchild the family name, the grandmother simply looks out of her window, notices a gardener who happens to be carrying a hammer, and decides to name the child Paul Hammer.

In Bullet Park, names become symbolic of the chancy nature of existence. When Hammer settles in Bullet Park with the determination to kill someone whose life is "without any genuine emotion or value" (166), he selects Nailles as much for the unforeseen association of their last names as anything else. It matters little to Hammer that at the last minute he shifts his murderous intentions to Eliot Nailles's son. The boy is easier to kidnap, and he shares his father's family name.

It is Swami Rutuola, the guru who cured Tony of his crippling depression, who warns Eliot Nailles that Hammer has

taken the boy to Christ's Church. Racing to the church, Nailles is able to saw the door down and prevent Hammer from burning the child alive as a sacrificial example to the world that it must not tolerate the corruption and emptiness that are typical of those who live in Bullet Park. After Nailles rescues his son, the novel ends with the ambiguous comment that life returned to normal and "everything was as wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, wonderful as it had been" (243).

The sardonic implications are clear: Nailles is still addicted to tranquilizers; the boy is still confused; and the suburban way of life that Cheever presents with an unsettling mix of satire and lyricism is still unchanged.

"Paint me a small railroad station then," the narrator of the first section of the novel begins:

> Beyond the platform are the waters of the Wekonsett River, reflecting a somber afterglow. The architecture of the station is oddly informal, gloomy but unserious, and mostly resembles a pergola, cottage or summer house although this is a climate of harsh winters. The lamps along the platform burn with a nearly palpable plaintiveness. The setting seems in some way to be at

the heart of the matter. (3)

There is a loveliness to this prose, a genuine sense for the chill, bleak beauty of winter afternoons in the country. So much of Cheever's best writing deals with the particular poignance of inhabited landscape, the yearning for permanence against the certainty of change which the lights of a small town shining through dusk can evoke. A threnody of dread surfaces so frequently in Cheever's fiction concerning travel, change, technology and progress that it often becomes the source of dark fantasy.

In one of Cheever's less well known stories, "The Angel of the Bridge," the narrator first learns that his brother is afraid to ride in elevators. Disliking such weakness, he is dismayed to discover that he himself cannot drive across bridges without similar symptoms of panic:

> Looking at Sunset Boulevard at three in the morning, I felt that my terror of bridges was an expression of my clumsily concealed horror of what is becoming of the world.... The truth is, I hate freeways and Buffalo Burgers. Expatriated palm trees and monotonous housing developments depress me. The continuous music on special-fare trains exacerbates my

> feelings. I detest the destruction of familiar landmarks. I am deeply troubled by the misery and drunkenness I find among my friends, I abhor the dishonest practices I see. And it was at the highest point in the arc of a bridge that I became aware suddenly of the depth and bitterness of my feelings about modern life, and of the profoundness of my yearning for a more vivid, simple, and peaceable world. (CS 495)

The narrator is able to control his fear only when he picks up a girl hitchhiker who has long hair, carries a small harp, and sings to him as he crosses the Tappan Zee Bridge. The girl, although dressed like a hippie in sixties style, is perhaps no more than a projection of the narrator's longing for simplicity, gentleness, and art to offset the surrounding landscape of ugly modernity.

Certainly, no writer could be farther from the American celebration of open spaces, highways, anonymity, and motion than Cheever. He represents the tide of reaction in our literature in which a longing for rootedness and continuity becomes the source of a wistful lryicism:

> When it is all over, when the gardens are planted and the furniture is settled, the

> rigors of the journey will have been concealed; but on this evening the blood memory of travels and migrations still courses through his veins. The people of Bullet Park intend not so much to have arrived there as to have been planted and grown there, but this of course was untrue. Disorder, moving vans, bank loans at high interest, tears, and desperation had characterized most of their arrivals and departures. (5)

Cheever could attain a sort of virtuosity in his variations on the theme of the transiency and bleakness of late twentieth century American culture. This aversion accounts, at least to some degree, for his unwillingness to dismiss suburban life as merely the object of satire. Even the more disordered suburbs in his fiction such as Proxmire Manor and Bullet Park are often described in tones of muted tenderness. They are the last places that seem to offer the intimacy, the permanence, and the natural beauty that were characteristic of American small towns. In these suburbs, it is the machine which is still the enemy, but the machine has become invested with supernatural powers. The train that sucks a Bullet Park resident named Shinglehouse under the tracks leaving in its wake only one shiny brown leather loafer

is strangely malevolent. This transference of human capacities onto machinery becomes a source for grotesque comedy as well as horror:

> Driving away from church Nailles turned on his windshield wiper although the rain had let up. The reason for this was that (at the time of which I'm writing) society had become so automative and nomadic that nomadic signals or means of communication had been established by the use of headlights, parking lights, signal lights and windshield wipers. The evening paper described the issues involved and the suitable signals. Hang the child murderer. (Headlights.) Reduce the state income tax. (Parking lights.) Abolish the secret police. (Emergency signal.) The diocesan bishop had suggested that churchgoers turn on their windshield wipers to communicate their faith in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. (21)

Spiralling into ominous fantasy, Bullet Park becomes more a poetic fiction of pastoral romance than a closely observed

novel of suburban manners. Although the setting is treated with careful verisimilitude, the events are far from realistic. It is as if Cheever could not make up his mind whether this book was to be a serious investigation of evil or a comic grotesque on contemporary life. Developing uneasily between fictional modes, Bullet Park lacks both thematic and structural unity.

The novel is divided into three parts. The first section, focusing mainly on Eliot Nailles, is presented by an invisible narrator who directs our attention to the scenes he paints and the meanings we are supposed to derive from the action. The second section is entirely concentrated on the life of Paul Hammer. Through the rather flat, factual language of his journal, we learn of Hammer's lonely childhood, his crazy mother, and his move to Bullet Park. The short final section rapidly sketches in Hammer's attempt to murder Tony Nailles and the Swami Rutuola's quick decision to warn Nailles that his son is in danger.

Possibly, Cheever used this structure to reinforce the religious dimension of Bullet Park since the three sections correspond to the Christian division of God into three persons: Eliot Nailles is primarily a father, Paul Hammer is defined as a son, and the Swami is the holy spirit who heals the sick.

Yet the manner in which Cheever handles the religious

underpinning of the novel is indicative, for he takes pains to reassure a sceptical reader that Eliot Nailles's "sense of the church calendar was much more closely associated with the weather than with the revelations and strictures in Holy Gospel" (15).

With its inclusion of irrelevent episodes, its arbitrary shifts in narrative voice, and its uncertain lurches from mild suburban satire to grotesque fable of crime, Bullet Park cannot be considered an artistic success. Yet, to dismiss the novel completely would be a mistake. Especially in the first section, Cheever is able to suggest the particular dishonesty of suburban life which would claim for itself an allegiance to nature and yet banish or destroy any wild life which threatens customary order:

> On the morning after the party Nellie was waked by the sound of gunfire....
>
> Nailles was not in bed and she went to the window. What she saw was Nailles in his underpants on their broad lawn, firing his shotgun at an immense snapping turtle. The sun had not risen but the sky was light and in this pure and subtle light the undressed man and the prehistoric turtle seemed engaged in some primordial and comical

> battle. Nailles raised his gun and fired at the turtle. The turtle recoiled, collapsed and then slowly raised itself up like a sea tortoise and began to lumber towards her husband. (119)

Despite the brilliance of some of the images and passages in Bullet Park, Cheever himself knew that the novel had not come together. Scott Donaldson, Cheever's friend and later his biographer, has written that after the publication of both The Wapshot Scandal and Bullet Park, Cheever was nearly suicidal (John Cheever 248). He needed another commercial success to give him financial security and to prove that he could handle larger forms. Yet his awareness of having had to wrestle with the elements of Bullet Park had warned him that the book was vulnerable to attack. Like so many gifted writers of the short story, Cheever measured his worth in relation to his ability to produce novels. "The saddest thing about the short story," Frank O'Connor has written, "is the eagerness with which those who write it best try to escape from it" (The Lonely Voice 170).

Although Cheever defended the episodic construction of Bullet Park as a reflection of the random, unpredictable quality of American life in the late twentieth century, many of the short scenes of the novel burst into life and then

suddenly disappear, leaving no trace upon the main development of plot or character. Neither Eliot Nailles nor Paul Hammer has a complexity of vision or breadth of compassion that are sufficient to warrant sustained attention. Circling around each other, Hammer and Nailles become "secret sharers" of the same existential confusion. Both live in Bullet Park; both work in advertising; Hammer is an alcoholic and Nailles is addicted to drugs. Hammer is Nailles's shadow, a double who threatens Nailles both from within and without.

The presence in Bullet Park of this enmeshing bond between two men is only a slight variation of the torturous brother relationship that appears so frequently in Cheever's fiction. Hammer and Nailles represent the two polarities of Cheever's own nature: the eternal outsider and the conformist; the unloved son and the family man; the obsessed moralist and the man in tweed jackets and well tailored suits trying to live in the suburbs as if he could not see the truth.

Chapter Eight

The World of Apples: A Story-Teller's Crisis

"It is the nature of the future, not its extinction, that produces in the artist such foreboding, the present chill of heart of a world without consciousness.
---Wright Morris, The Territory Ahead

"My point is that American writers seem, from the first, to have felt how tenuous, arbitrary and even illusory are the verbal constructs which men call descriptions of reality."
---Tony Tanner, City of Words

Cheever and his family went to Rome in 1956. He had finished The Wapshot Chronicle, and since it was already in production with Harpers, he longed for a change. Yet, Cheever was, by temperament, not a traveller. Walter Benjamin has written that there are two types of story-teller: those who stay in one place for many years, learn its lore and tell its stories as an insider; and those who travel to distant lands and bring home strange tales of wonder ("The Story-Teller" 1). Cheever wrote comparatively few stories during his year in Italy. Wanting desperately to understand everything he experienced, and to write with the same authority about being an American in Europe as Henry James, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald had done before him, Cheever was stopped by the force of his longing for home.

The things he saw in Italy shocked him. At first, he tried to write of the drafty palazzos and scheming baronessas

with a forced gaiety and bravado that turned the Italian stories into superficial tales of local color. Yet, while he was writing these light, often amusing sketches, he was becoming less and less able to cope with his darkest perceptions. It was as if he were beginning to lose faith in the power of his inventiveness, in the possibility that fiction could express the full texture of experience, and even in the power of language itself to translate the hieroglyphs of human existence.

The Bella Lingua" is the most successful of all the Italian stories. It stands out because it is saturated with the particular sorrow of the expatriate which Cheever experienced so profoundly. In all of his previous work, the yearning to be "home before dark" had revealed his dread of feeling placeless and unrooted. In "The Bella Lingua," Cheever allows, at least sporadically, his awareness of the pain of being foreign to become a metaphor for the pain of individual isolation.

The American in the story who lives in Rome is a divorced man named Wilson Streeter. He is aware that he has chosen to live alone in a world he will never fully understand. It is this sense of being an outsider that drives Streeter to study Italian. For Streeter--and for Cheever as well--there is still the last wistful hope that a common language will ease the loneliness. Yet, even as Streeter works through I Promessi

Sposi with his Italian teacher, he knows that "all arrangements in Rome are so complicated that lucidity and skepticism give way when we try to follow the description of a scene in court, a lease, a lunch, or anything else. Each fact or detail breeds more questions than it answers, and in the end we lose sight of the truth, as we were meant to do" (CS 304).

For Streeter, Italy is both exhilarating in its physical beauty, yet frightening in its mysteriousness. As he drives through the hills to visit friends, he sees "a country of such detail and loveliness that it could not be described" (CS 307).

Yet, as Streeter stands on his terrace the next morning, he sees a maid come out to pick a rose and put it in her hair. She begins to sing, and her song is gutteral and then strangely falsetto. Listening to it, Streeter finds that his Italian is "still so limited that he couldn't understand the words of the song, and this brought him around to the fact that he couldn't quite understand the landscape, either" (CS 307).

He goes regularly to his Italian teacher, a charming American woman named Kate Dresser who lives in a low-rent back apartment in the Palazzo Tarominia. Yet his progress in the language does not ameliorate the pain of walking alone through Rome on a Sunday afternoon:

> Because it was Sunday afternoon, the houses were mostly shut. The streets were deserted. When he passed anyone, it was usually a family group returning from an excursion to the zoo. There were also a few of those lonely men and women carrying pastry boxes that you see everywhere in the world at dusk on Sunday--unmarried aunts and uncles going out to tea with their relations and bringing a little pastry to sweeten the call. But mostly he was alone, mostly there was no sound but his own footsteps and, in the distance, the iron ringing of iron trolley-car wheels on iron tracks--a lonely sound on Sunday afternoons for many Americans; a lonely one for him, anyhow, and reminding him of some friendless, loveless, galling Sunday in his youth. (CS 309)

As he walks through the quiet city, Streeter notices a young man calling to one of the many cats who live in the alleys of Rome and subsist on leftover spaghetti. The man offers the hungry cat a piece of bread, but hides a firecracker underneath it so that just as the cat approaches, the powder explodes. The animal lets out a "hellish shriek," but the man and the people standing on the sidewalk laugh with

delight.

The grotesque cruelty of the prank horrifies Streeter and isolates him among the Italians who find it comical. When he returns to his Italian teacher on the following day, Streeter finds her in tears. Her son, who has grown up in Rome, has written to an uncle in Iowa, pleading with the uncle to take him home so that he can live in his own country. The uncle sets off immediately on what seems to him a mission of rescue.

Uncle George's journey from Naples to Rome becomes a tragi-comic version of the American yokel's inability to deal with the corruption of the old world. He is first escorted by the tour guide on a walk through Nero's villa in which there is "nothing leading anywhere anymore except to nothing" (CS 314). When the guide asks him softly whether he wishes to see "the special place....For men only...." (CS 314), Uncle George surrenders to temptation only to be thrown brutally to the ground and robbed of four hundred dollars. Stripped of his money and his pride, he boards a bus filled with elderly Americans; as they travel through the coastal towns, the Italians gape in wonder almost as if the tourists were animals travelling in a cage:

> The bus, with its glass roof and glass windows, was like a fishbowl, and the sunlight and cloud shadows of the day fell among the

travelers. Their way was blocked by a flock of sheep. Sheep surrounded the bus, isolated this little island of elderly Americans, and filled the air with dumb, harsh bleating....

They came into a town or city then--an old place with crooked and narrow streets. He didn't catch the name. The guide explained that there was a festa. The bus driver had to blow his horn continuously to make any progress, and two or three times came to a full stop, the crowd was so dense. The people in the streets looked up at this apparition--this fishbowl of elderly Americans--with such incredulity that Uncle George's feelings were hurt. He saw a little girl take a crust of bread out of her mouth to stare at him. Women held their children up in the air to see the strangers. Windows were thrown open, bars emptied, and people pointed at the curious tourists and laughed. (CS 313)

The elements of grotesque are all in place: the laughable juxtaposed against the horrifying; the subtle exaggeration contained within a narrative style of detailed realism; the reduction of human beings to apparitions seen in a fishbowl.

The horror of being an outsider which Cheever writes about in "The Bella Lingua" carries over into his last volume of short stories, The World of Apples. It is as if the fear of suddenly finding oneself alone--either spiritually or physically--amidst a group of hostile strangers pushed Cheever into writing a new fiction more radically grotesque and pessimistic than he had allowed himself to write before. Whether this experimentation represents a final and courageous effort to fully express the darker vision that was there from the beginning but held in check, or whether it merely records the failing powers of an author who was ill and unhappy is difficult to tell.

The first story in The World of Apples, "The Fourth Alarm," carries still further the theme of a man who suddenly finds himself left in a new and threatening form of isolation when his wife chooses to accept a part in a Broadway show called Ozamanides II even after the producer has told her that "she would be nude throughout the performance. She would be expected to simulate or perform copulation twice during the performance and participate in a love pile that involved the audience" (CS 646).

For a month or two, the husband puts off going to the performance, but on a snowy night he drives into the city and enters a theater in which the interior has been purposely demolished and rock music is playing at a deafening level:

> At eight thirty the houselights dimmed, and the cast--there were fourteen--came down the aisles. Sure enough, they were all naked excepting Ozamanides, who wore a crown.
>
> I can't describe the performance. Ozamanides had two sons, and I think he murdered them, but I'm not sure. The sex was general. Men and women embraced one another and Ozamanides embraced several men....Now on the stage Ozamanides was writing something obscene on my wife's buttocks. (CS 647)

At the end of the performance, the cast lines up and commands the audience to undress and join them. Wanting to understand the thrill his wife seems to find in public nudity, the husband undresses only to find himself in an embarrassing predicament. He has no idea what he should do with his wallet, wristwatch, and car keys.

When he decides to hold on to them as he walks up the aisle, a young man in the cast stops him and shouts, "Put down your lendings. Lendings are impure"(CS 648). One by one, each member of the cast, even his wife, picks up the incantation and begins to chant, "Put down your lendings, put down your lendings" (CS 648). As he clings to his possessions and stands exposed and doubtful, the man is aware that this moment has

become a metaphor for the fear of finding oneself alone and singled out for cruelty.

Repeatedly, in this last volume of stories, the female characters seem bent on nothing less than the physical or spiritual destruction of their husbands. In "Three Stories," a wife takes a nine hour airplane journey with her husband in such stony silence that the reader is led to believe that the two are strangers, that the narrator-- when he turns to her with a pleasant question about the book she is reading-- simply wants to enjoy a few minutes of conversation with a woman he finds beautiful.

Although her replies to him are monosyllabic and rude, the woman smiles dazzlingly at the stewardess. When the plane lands in Rome, she gathers her things and he stands aside to let her pass along the aisle ahead of him. He follows her through the passport, emigrant, and health check stations and only then does Cheever allow the reader a fuller understanding of the narrator's intense loneliness:

> But look, look. Why does he point out her bag to the porter and why, when they both have their bags, does he follow her out to the cab stand, where he bargains with a driver for the trip to Rome? Why does he join her in the cab? Is he the undiscourageable masher that she

> dreaded? No, no. He is her husband, she is his wife, the mother of his children, and a woman he has worshipped passionately for nearly thirty years. (CS 680)

None of the stories in which feminine destructiveness is the generating force for the plot is wholly successful. It is as if each woman's cruelty is so violent, her nature so grotesquely self-absorbed and murderous that she not only destroys her husband, but tears the fabric of the fiction as well. For her meanness is arbitrary, unrelenting, unmotivated, and presented without explanation.

In "The Chimera," (The World of Apples) the husband brings his wife Zena breakfast in bed each morning only to hear her say, "I cannot any longer endure being served breakfast in bed by a hairy man in his underwear" (CS 473). And when he cooks her dinner each evening on a grill in the backyard, she still remains implacably hostile:

> "You're so inconsiderate," she thundered. "You never think of me."
>
> "I'm sorry, darling," I said. "Wasn't the hamburger done?" She was drinking straight gin, and I didn't want a quarrel.
>
> "It wasn't the hamburger--I'm used to the

> garbage you cook. What I have for dinner is no longer of any importance to me. I've learned to get along with what I'm served. It's just that your whole attitude is so inconsiderate."
>
> "What have I done, darling?" I always call her darling, hoping that she may come around.
>
> "What have you done? What have you done?" Her voice rose, and her face got red, and she got to her feet, and standing above me, she screamed, "You've ruined my life, that's what you've done." (CS 474)

Zena's horrid disposition becomes genuinely frightening when she enters the kitchen one evening as the husband is washing dishes. She is holding his straight razor and screaming, "You'd better not leave things like this lying around....If you know what's good for you, you'd better not leave things like this lying around. There are plenty of women in the world who would cut you to ribbons for what I've endured..." (CS 475).

To solace himself, the narrator invents Olga, a tender and loving young girl who smells of the forests, and has long dark hair and olive-colored skin. He is very clear regarding her unreality. "Who, under the circumstances, would invent a shrew, a harridan?" he asks the reader(CS 476). But Olga's

presence can never be relied upon. There are moments when the narrator needs her desperately and she does not materialize; then, as he sits on the edge of the bathtub reading the newspaper in the middle of the night, she appears:

> "Oh my darling," I said, "I thought you were going to meet me at the restaurant." She said something about not wanting to be seen by my wife. Then she sat down beside me on the bathtub, I put my arms around her, and we talked about her plans. (CS478)

Eventually, Olga decides that she must return to her husband in California, and although the narrator is briefly saddened, he also realizes that Olga's departure might herald the beginning of a new freedom to invent other chimeras, different from Olga in appearance, but equally comforting.

The narrator's need for Olga derives not only from the unhappiness of his marriage, but also from a mysterious gloom which has settled over his spirit:

> I remembered a parade in the village I had taken my youngest son to not long ago....There were two costume bands and half a dozen platoons of the fraternity. The marchers, the brotherhood,

> seemed mostly to be marginal workmen--post office clerks and barbers, I guess. The weather couldn't have accounted for my attitude, because I remembered clearly that it was fair and cool, but the effect of the parade upon me was as somber as if I had stood on some gallows hill. In the ranks I saw faces lined by drink, harried by hard work, wasted by worry, and stamped invariably with disappointment. (CS479)

This darkened vision of human existence pervades The World of Apples so consistently that a reader becomes uncomfortably aware that Cheever's ability to let the stories float free from his own personal obsessions was diminishing. Against this pessimism, even the recourse of language no longer seemed trustworthy, and the last stories are marked by a strange surrealism in which the old uses of words are either abandoned completely or turned upside down.

"Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin" tells of the culture shock of a traveler who comes back to America after a year in Europe. In each of the men's rooms he enters, he finds not the usual pornography written on the cubicle doors, but long compositions of flowery Gothic romance such as "The great manor house of Wallowyck stood on a hill above the smoky mill town of X____burgh, its countless mullioned windows seeming

to peer censoriously into the dark and narrow alleys of the slums that reached from the park gates to the smoking mills on the banks of the river" (CS 556).

As he travels westward across the country, he finds florid paragraphs of historical fiction written on the marble walls of lavatories, with passages that begin, "It had been a day of triumph in Capua. Lentulus, returning with victorious eagles, had amused the populace with the sports of the amphitheater to an extent hitherto unknown, even in that luxurious city" (CS 555). There is comedy in the situation, and Cheever is delighting in his own powers of parody. But, there is also disorientation, for the narrator senses that this sort of public writing is announcing a new world, a world which confuses and dismays him:

> What had happened, I supposed, was that as pornography moved into the public domain, those marble walls, those immemorial repositories of such sport, had been forced, in self-defense, to take up the more refined task of literature. I found the idea revolutionary and disconcerting, and wondered if in a year or two I would be able to read the poetry of Sara Teasdale in a public toilet, while the King of Sweden honored some dirty-minded brute. (CS 558)

It seems to him that while he has been abroad there must have been some change in the social climate and, with a sudden urge to fathom this new phenomenon, he applies to a group of old friends who work for foundations. But their reaction is so instantaneously negative that he can only conclude that they have "joined the ranks of those new men who feel that the truth is no longer usable in solving our dilemmas" (CS 560).

This concern that language fails to make the vital connection which could save us from despair becomes the theme of "The Geometry of Love," one of Cheever's most bizarre and wistful tales written in 1966 and collected first in The World of Apples.

Charlie Mallory lives in a world turned grotesque. When he accidentally runs into his wife in the basement of a Woolworths near his office, she accuses him of spying on her. The incident unsettles Mallory, and he returns to his office through the overcast and rainy streets of midtown Manhattan. He is alone; business is slow, his secretary is vacationing in Capri, and the telephone answering service has no messages for him. The solitude is strange; even though Mallory knows that he has "not lost his sense of reality," he fears that the reality he observes has "lost its fitness and symmetry" (CS 595).

Below him, on the street, he sees a van pass by advertising "Euclid's Dry Cleaning and Dyeing" and suddenly

what seems like an inspiration occurs to him:

> The great name reminded him of the right-angled triangle, the principles of geometric analysis, and the doctrine of proportion for both commensurables and incommensurables. What he needed was a new form of ratiocination, and Euclid might do. If he could make a geometric analysis of his problems, mightn't he solve them, or at least create an atmosphere of solution? (CS 595)

Heartened by his plan, Mallory gets a slide rule and begins to draw triangles representing his wife, his children and himself. His theorems and drawings are strangely powerful; the invective with which his wife greets him when he comes home seems not to touch him. The next night, Mallory finds an old geometry text up in his attic. Surprisingly, he finds that "the study of Euclid [puts] him into a compassionate and tranquil frame of mind....Geometry served him beautifully for the metaphysics of understood pain" (CS 597).

In every situation that Mallory confronts, his new ability to reduce issues to their proper geometric proportion lends him a detachment that leaves his emotions undisturbed. When he has to go to Chicago on business and finds that his

hostess spends the evening tying tags that are labeled "Chicago Storage Warehouse" on each piece of her living room furniture, he remains unperturbed; even after his hostess reports that a neighbor's husband just "got drunk and put the kitten in the blender" (CS 598), Charlie Mallory is able to extricate himself calmly from the chaotic scene and take a cab back to his hotel.

Eventually, Mallory finds that through geometry, he can even make unpleasantness disappear. When, on a second train journey to Chicago, he passes Gary, Indiana with its gray smoke and ugly steel mills, he is astonished at his new powers:

> At about four-thirty he went up to the club car for a drink, and seeing the mass of Gary in the distance, repeated the theorem that had corrected the angle of his relationship to the Indiana landscape. He ordered a drink and looked out of the window at Gary. There was nothing to be seen. He had, through some miscalculation, not only rendered Gary powerless; he had lost Gary. There was no rain, no fog, no sudden dark to account for the fact that, to his eyes, the windows of the club car were vacant. Indiana had disappeared (CS 601).

Within a week, however, Mallory is suddenly taken ill, and listed in critical condition at the hospital. While he is hospitalized, he begins to realize that his wife's increasing capacity to inflict mental and physical torment on him might cause his death. She spills hot broth all over his chest, and comments icily that she wishes she could stay in bed for two weeks and be waited on.

Asking the nurse to bring him his slide rule and notebook, Mallory works out "a simple, geometrical analogy between his love for Mathilda and his fear of death" (CS 602). But his powers of geometry have become as potentially dangerous as the indifference of his wife, and he senses that in this last calculation, his very life is at stake:

> He reasoned carefully, since he knew that a miscalculation, such as he had made for Gary, would end those events that had begun when Euclid's Dry Cleaning and Dyeing truck had passed under his window. Mathilda went from the hospital to a restaurant and then to a movie, and it was the cleaning woman who told her, when she got home, that he had passed away (CS 602).

Indifference, cruelty, and death are everywhere in The

World of Apples; yet, although the darkness overpowered optimism, Cheever still clung to his sense of the impropriety of despair. In a rather unfocused story, "The Jewels of the Cabots," Cheever asks himself, "Why would I sooner describe church bells and flocks of swallows? Is this a puerile, a sort of greeting-card mentality, a whimsical and effeminate refusal to look at facts" (CS 689)?

This strain between Cheever's anguished vision of life as a grotesque and frightening journey and his willed determination to find solace in nature, in sports, in liquor, and laughter runs through all of Cheever's fictions. It is as if the Puritan ancestors he fought so desperately would not leave him in peace, and at the end, he went down under the struggle. When Cheever dared to look unblinkingly at the world he perceived, that world turned surreal and grotesque. Even story-telling no longer worked to keep the demons at a distance, for he had lost faith in the ability of a story to keep truth fresh and alive; he dreaded the way that stories--especially the wonderful ones he had told all his life--fixed a temporary perception in an imprisoning permanence. "How smooth it all seems and how different it must have been," (CS 635) Cheever muses as he tells the story of the aunt who called herself Percy, smoked cigars, painted huge classical canvasses, and loved her nasty and unfaithful husband with a life-long passion.

The terrors embedded in Cheever's late fiction are no longer the manageable terrors of suburbia or financial anxiety; they have become terrors of the psyche which he could not subdue. The force of these terrors erupts into the last short stories, fragmenting them and yet giving them a certain fascination and sorrow. For they are the record of Cheever's heroic attempt to go on telling stories even when he no longer believed in the old forms of fiction which had served him so well. Narrative, language, character--none of it seemed trustworthy and he kept breaking through the traditional boundaries between reader and author as if to hold the fiction up to a light in which both parties could distance themselves from the new world of Cheever's imagination which had become too dark and grotesque to fully inhabit.

Chapter Nine

American Grotesque: Cheever and the American Tradition

"In middle age there is mystery, there is mystification. The most I can make out of this hour is a kind of loneliness. Even the beauty of the visible world seems to crumble, yes even love. I feel that there has been some miscarriage, some wrong turning, but I do not know when it took place and I have no hope of finding it."

--John Cheever, The Journals of John Cheever

"Modern art sees life as tragi-comedy, with the result that the grotesque is its most genuine style....The grotesque is the genuine anti-bourgeois style...."

--Thomas Mann

"In nineteenth-century American writing, there was a good deal of grotesque literature which came from the frontier and was supposed to be funny; but our present grotesque characters, comic though they may be, are at least not primarily so. They seem to carry an invisible burden; their fanaticism is a reproach, not merely an eccentricity."

--Flannery O'Connor

"In its fundamental quality Winesburg is nonrealistic; it does not seek to gratify the eye with a verisimilitude to social forms in the way a Dreiser or Zola novel does.... In rather shy lyrical outbursts, the book conveys a vision of American life as a depressed landscape cluttered with dead stumps, twisted oddities, grotesque and pitiful wrecks....Again and again Winesburg suggests that beneath the exteriors of our life the deformed exert dominion, that the seeming health of our state derives from a deep malignancy."

---Irving Howe, Sherwood Anderson: A Critical Biography

Like Sherwood Anderson, John Cheever, too, wrote about a gallery of grotesques, characters who have become isolated

and frozen in their struggle towards spiritual expansiveness. In Cheever's fiction, there is almost no possibility of fulfilling love between a man and a woman, and there is no pleasure left in work. The suburbanites in his stories move restlessly through what Samuel Coales calls a "lethal Eden"; (John Cheever 11) they are dispossessed figures who have lost all connection to the world beyond. As such, they become the "submerged population group" which Frank O'Connor speaks about in his study of the short story (The Lonely Voice:)

> In fact, the short story has never had a hero. What it has instead is a submerged population group--a bad phrase which I have had to use for want of a better. That submerged population changes its character from writer to writer, from generation to generation. It may be Gogol's officials, Turgenev's serfs, Maupassant's prostitutes, Chekhov's doctors and teachers, Sherwood Anderson's provincials, always dreaming of escape....
>
> The submerged population is not submerged entirely by material considerations; it can also be submerged by the absence of spiritual ones. (18)

This loss of a rich inner life is perhaps the most

painful diminishment which the inhabitants of Cheever's fiction must endure. They are no longer like the lonely dreamers who populate Winesburg; instead, they yearn only for financial security and marital calm. No one is happy in Cheever's suburbs, and it is a mistake to see his work as a facile celebration of suburban values.

Beneath the noisy gaiety, there is a pained recognition of dread. Even the narrative voice Cheever uses is chilling in its tacit assumption that any normal person would share the narrator's definition of what constitutes the good life. Cheever's characters drink, dance, play tennis and swim; they drive to the railroad station, go to the supermarket, and return from tiring business trips. They might occasionally go to church, but during the service they listen to a rat gnawing at the woodwork, or wonder who the newcomer across the aisle might be.

The absence of introspection in Cheever's fiction derives not only from his subject matter, but also from a personal reticence that Susan Cheever describes in the memoir she wrote about her father:

> He never spoke about feelings or allowed himself to speculate on the inner mechanics of the family. "I love you all equally," he would say, or "I adore your mother." People remember my father's candor.

> "Although his manner was reticent, there was nothing John would not say about himself," Saul Bellow recalled in his eulogy at my father's funeral. In a way, that was true. He would tell you exactly what he had done to this or that mistress in a room at the St. Regis or in a motel in Iowa, and he would tell you that The New Yorker had paid him less than $1000 for a story, and he would tell you that he took two Valiums and drank a pint of gin every day before noon. That was different, though. He did not like to talk about human emotions. He did talk, often eloquently, about human behavior. Are they really the same? I don't think so. My father's intense concentration on what you can see and hear and smell and touch was at the core of his gift as a writer. He focused on the surface and texture of life, not on the emotions and motives underneath. (77)

This unwillingness to explain a character's inner life, to muse over it, or allow the reader direct entrance into a character's mental processes became for Cheever--as it did for Flannery O'Connor--almost an article of belief. It is this shared determination to dramatize rather than ponder the heart

of human mystery that gives both Cheever's and O'Connor's fiction its hard edge.

In an article called "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," O'Connor writes of her conviction that it is the concrete, and the visible which must lead the reader into a meditation upon evil and grace. "Fiction begins where human knowledge begins--with the senses," she asserts. But the writer of the grotesque--or to use Flannery O'Connor's term--of the mysterious--will use the "concrete in a more drastic way. His way will much more obviously be the way of distortion" (42). As a result, this sort of fiction will look violent and comic "because of the discrepancies that it seeks to combine" (O'Connor 43).

Often, these characters who are presented so dramatically through their external actions seem to become almost caricatures of themselves, and their speech is reduced to the tag phrases of their fanaticism. "Jesus thrown everything off balance," The Misfit says in Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find," just as Charlie Pastern keeps repeating, "Bomb Cuba! Bomb Berlin! Let's throw a little nuclear hardware at them and show them who's boss" ("The Brigadier and the Golf Widow" 498).

Like O'Connor, Cheever creates the grotesque through the co-presence of inexplicable violence and absurdity. In his last, very short novel, Oh What a Paradise it Seems, Cheever

invents a character named Sammy Salazzo who comes home from a bad day at work to find that his wife has not prepared dinner and is instead watching a game show on television. To divert her from the show, and to teach her and their children how serious life is, Sammy simply decides to shoot their dog Buster:

> He got his rifle together and loaded the weapon. Then he went into the living room and turned off the TV. "You're all going to see this," he said. "It's about time somebody around here realized how serious life is. We can't go on welfare because I got this business but we got to make sacrifices and Buster is going to be the first sacrifice we make."
>
> Both of the children began to cry, "Oh no, no, Daddy, no, no." In years to come, both of his daughters, lying naked in the arms of strangers, would say with as much intimacy as a declaration of love: "Did I ever tell you about the night Daddy shot the dog?" But now they were children, bewildered by the adult world and by a scene that would bewilder anyone in its grotesqueness....
>
> The children were screaming. Maria's sobbing was profound and life appeared to her a chaos with

> no guiding lights of any sorts. Sammy led the old dog out into the backyard and asked him to sit down a little to the right of the charcoal brazier. He then backed away a few yards and shot him through the heart. (Paradise 26)

By witholding any profound investigation of how such violence erupts so accidentally and arbitrarily, both authors create thesense of an external world which is problematical and estranged. Even in one of Cheever's lighter stories, "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill," Johnny Hake, the suburbanite who robs his neighbors in order to pay his bills, is only stopped by the police as he is walking home in the middle of the night after returning the stolen cash.

Although there is distortion beneath the surface of O'Connor's and Cheever's prose, their stories seem, on first inspection, to be written in a style of impeccable realism. This illusion of realism is necessary in any creation of grotesque, for as Philip Thomson writes in his study entitled The Grotesque, the grotesque must not be associated too closely with the fantastic. Just as Kafka presents "The Metamorphosis" in an entirely real and matter-of-fact way, grotesque does not possess a necessary affinity with the fantastic, but "derives at least some of its effect from being

presented within a realistic framework, in a realistic way"(8).

The casual and down-to-earth style of Cheever's prose disguises itself as a fiction of manners, yet his stories are not primarily an effort to render reality closely and in detail. Rather, they conform much more closely to D.H. Lawrence's understanding that "the smoother the surface, the more primordial forces erupt" (Studies in Classic American Literature)

Because the stories are narrated in the style and tone of upper middle class ease, the insanity inhabiting them is suppressed; the characters, in general, are only marginally conscious of their own despair. They illustrate Kierkegaard's understanding that "the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair" (The Sickness unto Death). This obliviousness makes Cheever's stories so unlike the type of grotesque tales Edgar Allan Poe wrote, for the characters Poe creates are agonizingly aware of their own mental deterioration. Cheever's characters stave off awareness by staying in motion. They attempt to banish and exorcise the demonic element of the world through their diversions, but at the end they are defeated.

It is jarring that Cheever creates this world of abiding strangeness in the American suburbs, the least exotic of all landscapes. Yet, he shares the anxiety of other American

writers who sense that something in the way we have composed our lives is radically wrong. In certain ways, Cheever's fiction resembles the work of Wright Morris, for as Jonathan Baumbach writes, Morris's characters are "seven-eighths submerged and are rarely conscious of the causes of their own dissatisfaction" (The Landscape of Nightmare 154). Baumbach goes on to list some of the characteristic preoccupations of Wright Morris which--despite Morris's Nebraskan background--are clearly similar to Cheever's: "prohibitive isolation, violence repressed and exploded, the castrating female, the castrated male, the unlived life, the narcosis of nostalgia, the 'self-unmade man,' the whimsical nature of the universe...(154).

This "whimsical nature of the universe" presents itself frequently in American fiction through the random appearance of two characters who mirror each other's distortions, and are thus bonded in an unbreakable relationship of love and hate. Just as Eliot Nailles and Paul Hammer are reverse images of each other in Bullet Park[1], so, too, Asa Leventhal and Kirby Allbee haunt each other in Saul Bellow's The Victim:

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[1] This use of the "doppelgaenger," or characters who represent two opposing aspects of one divided personality is present in Cheever's frequent portrayal of warring brothers ("Goodbye, My Brother"), and in such stories as "The Scarlet Moving Van." Charlie Folkestone is the embodiment of the narrator's conscience and his own dread of falling through the levels of America's social hierarchy.

> The confrontation of Leventhal with Allbee, of man with his own distorted image, his fallen self, and the consequent recognition of an apparently boundless guilt, for which he suffers and for which he achieves through suffering the possibility, or illusion, of redemption has become in various disguises one of the abiding concerns of the contemporary American novel. (Baumbach 54)

In his gravitation towards themes of distortion, loss, and evil, Cheever is a writer in the tradition of American Romance.[2] Although there is humor in Cheever's work, it is painful, rather like the hollow laughter of Ethan Brand as it reverberates fearfully through the Greylock Mountains.

That Cheever should share Nathaniel Hawthorne's anguish in the world is not surprising. Both were aware of their Puritan heritage and both dreaded its influence. In the fictional worlds of Cheever and Hawthorne, characters are haunted by loneliness, guilt, and the terror of having somehow

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[2] In his insightful book, The American Novel and its Tradition, Richard Chase writes that "since its earliest days the American novel, in its most original and characteristic form has worked out its destiny and defined itself by incorporating an element of romance [which] must signify, besides the most obvious qualities of the picturesque and heroic, an assumed freedom from the ordinary novelistic requirements of verisimilitude, development, and continuity; a tendency towards melodrama and idyl; a more or less formal abstractness and, on the other hand, a tendency to plunge into the underside of consciousness." (ix)

slipped through the grid that holds them within the human community.

This fear is intensified through the almost obsessive fascination that the idea of separation from the community holds for both writers. When Cheever describes Eliot Nailles's disorientation as he escapes in neurotic panic from the commuter train and finds himself in an unknown suburban station (Bullet Park), it is the same disorientation--both terrifying and strangely alluring--which Wakefield experiences as he steps out of his life for twenty years.

"It is perilous to make a chasm in human affections; not that they gape so long and wide--but so quickly close again!" Hawthorne writes in "Wakefield." Perhaps this terror of becoming "the Outcast of the Universe" ("Wakefield"147) found its source in both authors from the same fear each felt that he himself had a kind of "ice in the blood" which made him solitary even in the midst of human community.

"There was always some unimaginable solitude in society," Alfred Kazin writes about Hawthorne. Cheever's fiction and his journals published posthumously in 1991 are saturated with his awareness of loneliness, but it is a loneliness and even a desperation which is attributed not to the reality of evil in the world, but rather to some personal failing which the author feels within himself. Cheever could admit frightening truths about his own human weaknesses, but he could not bring

himself to fully acknowledge the diabolic forces in the world of which Hawthorne and Herman Melville were so aware. Whether or not the devil in "Young Goodman Brown" actually inhabits the forest at night, or is, in reality, only Goodman Brown's dream hardly matters: he is capable of doing irreparable harm to the young man's soul.

Similarly, Moby Dick, the white whale, represents, in part, the utter indifference of nature to human welfare. Melville could create the whale because he was able to accept what he called "the blackness of darkness." For whatever reason, Cheever needed to see those darker elements as a symptom of his own unwellness rather than as inherent within the universe; it is this unwillingness to fully acknowledge the reality of evil which causes him so often to pull back at the end of his stories, to find a quick resolution that will assure the reader--and himself perhaps as well--that everything is for the best.

In his inability to accept the reality of irrational and random evil, Cheever echoes in a somewhat reduced form the instinctive optimism of Ralph Waldo Emerson; it is interesting that the two are similar also in their utter distrust of the past. "Out they go--" Cheever could write, "the Roman coins, the sea horse from Venice, and the Chinese fan. We can cherish nothing less than our random understanding of death and the

earth-shaking love that draws us to one another" ("The Lowboy 412).

In his eagerness to throw off the constraints of history, Cheever reitterates Emerson's impassioned question: "Why should we grope among the dry bones of the past"? ("Nature" 572). And, of course, Emerson and Cheever are in agreement regarding the redemptive power of nature. Cheever's characters are cured of their troubles by the sound of rain; they find refuge by the sea, and solace in the woods. In an early uncollected story called "Run Sheep, Run" (1941) Cheever writes of two young lovers who leave the city for a day trip into the country. Dave has stolen the money for this excursion from a bookstore in Greenwich Village, but his theft does not weigh upon him at all. Instead, he and Renee rent bikes, sunbathe, revel in the views, and when they ride through a nearly deserted village, Dave silences the rattle of his bicycle in instinctive accord with the stillness of nature. Neither of them profanes the quiet with noise. Their joy contrasts so sharply with the anguish of Cheever's suburbanites that a reader perceives the paradox of ownership. In Cheever's fictional world, it is the act of purchase that precedes the fall from Eden.

Thus, in a very real but idiosyncratic way, Cheever continues the long tradition of pastoral literature in America. His fiction is filled with threatening images of

machines and technology: bridges, freeways, airplanes, shopping malls, and, of course, commuter trains all bring paralyzing fear and death. The Cape Cod cottages and Tudor homes that line his suburban streets are the contemporary equivalent to the dark and windowless offices in which Bartleby the Scrivener slowly wastes away. Even the perfectly kept gardens in Shady Hill suggest the same eerie artificiality that F. Scott Fitzgerald recognized in the emerald green of the grass that rolls like a carpet from the beach up to Daisy and Tom Buchanan's Long Island house.

Although Fitzgerald and Cheever were both haunted by a vision of America in which the ash heap slowly engulfed the wilderness, their work differs in an important respect: Scott Fitzgerald had a greater capacity to love, to lavish tenderness on his characters even as they self destruct (Trilling 229-239).

It is perhaps Cheever's tendency to view his characters from a distance, to see them as both comic and pathetic that opens the door to grotesque. "There is an absence of feeling that usually accompanies laughter," Henri Bergson writes. "Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion...." To produce its effect, comedy demands "a momentary anesthesia of the heart" (Laughter 64) As Cheever sets his characters in motion, a reader senses this "anesthesia," for though Cheever often referred to himself as

"a sad man," there is a certain coldness and removal in his act of creation. As a result, the characters in Cheever's fiction emerge as unloved children: neurotic, enmeshed in seemingly trivial anguish, and robbed of the ability to affirm themselves. As a result, they live within narrow boundaries that they have no hope or even desire to escape.

Cheever was aware that his writing was always about forms of confinement. In an interview, he said,"All my work deals with confinement in one shape or another, and the struggle for freedom" (Interview with John Firth 1977). The images of Charlie Folkestone rolling around his deserted house in a child's red wagon; Neddy Merrill swimming through the narrow lane of suburban pools to find that his home is empty and locked; Cash Bentley leaping over living room furniture--all are images of men who are locked into prisons more inescapable even than Ezekiel Farragut's cell in the Falconer State Penitentiary.

The characters Cheever gave to American fiction are without immensity of spirit or grandeur, yet they have a strange power to haunt our collective memory. In their mediocrity there still remains a yearning for radiance, a nearly extinguished memory of ancestors who came to America, and with a pioneer spirit, dared greatly. Everything about them is reduced, yet in their loneliness, their perplexity, they are the images of our fear for ourselves.

Cheever explored a spiritual and a geographical territory in contemporary American life that no one before him had chosen to enter. In the same way that Faulkner made Yoknapatawpha county his own, Cheever, too, might have written: Shady Hill. Population 4500. Owner and sole proprietor John Cheever. And though his fiction does not achieve the tragic proportions of Faulkner's, it has an importance of its own. Like all fine short story writers, Cheever was concerned primarily with the meaning of lives that would remain anonymous, that would struggle above all else to conceal the reality of their pain, a reality which, in Cheever's world, is the only unspeakable topic, and the final intensification of sorrow.

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