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The Message of Cheever's "Swimmer"

Several layers of meaning float throughout John Cheever's "The Swimmer." On the surface, this story is an epic journey of a man who is looking for answers to some important questions in his life. On a deeper level exists a message of caution. Because the protagonist serves as a metaphor for contemporary society, his journey and its outcome prophesy a vision of what the future holds for its members. Cheever warns that unless American society discontinues its present course, we will end our journey standing at the door of life's house just as Neddy did. Our society will be left empty through regrettable actions while brushing rust from our water-pruned hands. Cheever reveals this lesson by depicting flaws in Neddy's surrounding culture, by his lack of recognition of personal flaws, and through his refusal to accept the reality of time.

The flaws of American culture are readily present in this story. The people that surround the pools on the youthful side of Route 424 are shallow people. They seem to be only occupied with money, drinking, and social standing. Neddy's description of the Bunker's pool party creates a picture of affluence. Cheever writes, "Oh, how bonny and lush were the banks of the Lucinda River! Prosperous men and women gathered by the sapphire-colored waters while caterer's men in white coats passed them cold gin" (284). Shallow greetings and invitations are given to the swimmer as he goes by. These society friends are constantly trying to put a drink in this man's hands. This is another evidence of how little they truly care about him. We find out later that Neddy is an alcoholic and all of his society friends know it. Grace Biswanger says about Neddy, "They went for broke overnight—nothing but income—and he showed up drunk one Sunday and asked us to loan him five thousand dollars..."(286).

In the story we also witness Neddy's refusal to accept his own flaws. The reader sees Neddy as a hypocrite. He doesn't possess a true picture of himself. He complains of a hangover as he has a drink in his hand. On the young side of the road, Neddy appears to be a bit of a narcissist. He remarks on several different occasions of his "slenderness" and how he could be "compared to a summer's day" (283). He is bold enough to

parade through town in his swimming shorts. However, the people driving along the road see him as a ridiculous figure, one that Cheever says that we should pity. Another way that Cheever shows Neddy's refusal to accept his flaws is his inability to remember his past sins. Cheever writes, "Was he losing his memory, has his gift for concealing painful facts let him forget that he had sold his house, that his children were in trouble, and his friend had been ill?" (288).

Neddy refuses to accept the consequences of time. He is full of energy at the beginning of his journey. Neddy smiles at his friends as he artfully jumps into their pools. His mistress tells him to grow up. After he crosses Route 424 to the other side that represents middle age, poverty, and despair, he begins to show signs of his age. The journey now becomes more difficult. After his visit with the Hollorans, Neddy laments, "He was cold and he was tired.... The swim was too much for his strength but how could he have guessed this.... Leaves were falling down around him and he smelled wood smoke on the wind. Who would be burning wood at this time of year?" (288). However painful his journey is, Ned still presses on. He is still determined to get back to his house that he should know is empty. By this action, he is refusing to accept both the consequences of his actions and the relentless movement of time.

The thesis of "The Swimmer" emphasizes the need for our society to accept responsibility for our actions. Neddy is representative of a society who is driven by a need for overindulgence and of a culture who has lost touch with themselves. However stern Cheever's story is, he still has faith in American way. He writes of America in the Bicentennial edition of Newsweek magazine:

If I'm truly annoyed, there's a line from Milton I like to recall: "Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation rising herself like a strong man after sleep." Sometimes I think it should read "a noble and puissant nation sleeping." The future doesn't look dismal.... We are a nation of immigrants, which accounts for the unprecedented diversity, richness and vitality of our blood.... There is still newness in this country, freshness. We are still experimenting. This is a haunted nation. Haunted by a dream of excellence. (36).

"The Swimmer" is Cheever's contribution to that dream of excellence and should wake his reader and motivate us all toward our still-elusive dream of excellence.

Works Cited

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