The Swimmer

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN CHEEVER

John Cheever was born in 1912 to a middle-class family, although his family fell into financial straits during the Great Depression. The young Cheever attended Thayer academy and showed early promise as a short story writer, his first story being published in 1930 at the age of 18. However, his grades were poor and he was expelled before graduation. Afterward, he moved to New York City, where he married Mary Winternitz in 1941. Cheever enlisted in the army in 1942 during World War II, but he never saw combat. After the war, Cheever and his family moved to Ossining, New York, and he became a prolific writer of short stories, many of which were published in the *New Yorker*. The Ossining suburbs where he lived became the inspiration for much of his work, and he was subsequently known as the "Chekov of the suburbs," after the 19th century Russian short-story writer Anton Chekov. Despite modest literary success, Cheever suffered from deep depression and alcoholism for most of his life, the full extent of which was only revealed with the publication of his letters after his death in 1982. Also revealed were Cheever's affairs with both men and women. Despite his disastrous family life, he was deeply invested in maintaining an image of himself as a successful family man, which can be seen in many of his characters.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

After World War II, an entire generation of veterans returned to the United States and began to start families, leading to a population surge that's often called the "baby boom." This contributed to the growth of the suburbs, alongside several other trends, including the interstate highway system and "white flight" (white relocation from cities to suburbs) after a wave of African-American migration to large cities. Mid-century suburbs were areas of medium density populated by middle- and upper-middle class people who drove cars. Many of Cheever's stories and novels are set in this milieu, and indeed, he himself lived what from the outside must have appeared a classic middle-class suburban life.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

John Cheever was heavily influenced by American fiction of the 1930s and 40s, especially short fiction by F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Fitzgerald's grandiose, doomed heroes are sometimes echoed in Cheever's characters, but Fitzgerald's have a romantic, noble quality, while Cheever's are often sad and small. Neddy Merrill in "The Swimmer" shares Gatsby's intense imagination, but his quest is pitiable and foolish. Cheever's work, and "The Swimmer" in particular, is situated in the context of literary movements like Naturalism and Social Realism, which started in the late 19th century. These movements tried to depict objective reality and social conditions, and Cheever participates in this to the extent that he explores the social conditions of the upper-middle class in the suburbs. However, Cheever introduced fantastical elements and unreliable narration to more fully explore the psyches and relationships of suburban residents. In his story "The Enormous Radio," for example, a couple find a radio that broadcasts their neighbors' private thoughts. And in "The Swimmer," Neddy Merrill's intense self-delusion causes the reader to question his perception of the story's events. Additionally, Cheever was frequently compared to the Russian writer Anton Chekhov, who pushed the limits of the short story in the late 19th-century. Chekhov's stories made brilliant use of irony to undercut his characters' worldviews and lingered somewhere between comedy and tragedy, much like Cheever's stories some fifty years later.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Swimmer
- **When Written:** ca. 1964
- **Where Written:** Ossining, New York
- **When Published:** 1964
- **Literary Period:** Postwar Fiction
- **Genre:** Magical Realism, Ironic Comedy
- **Setting:** a suburban town in the 1960s
- **Climax:** Neddy's return home
- **Antagonist:** None, although Neddy is his own antagonist
- **Point of View:** 3rd person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Dressing For The Job While writing from home in an apartment building in New York, Cheever nevertheless put on a suit and rode the elevator downstairs in the morning with the corporate workers in his building. He took the elevator down to a basement storage room, where he removed the suit and wrote all day.

A Lucky Break Cheever enlisted in the army during World War II and finished basic training, but an officer and movie executive named Leonard Spiegelgass admired his work and transferred him to a position writing scripts for propaganda films in New York. The rest of his unit would later see bloody combat during D-Day in France.

PLOT SUMMARY

On one of those midsummer Sundays when everyone sits around complaining that they drank too much the night before, Neddy Merrill sits by his neighbor's **pool**. He's described as a man in youthful middle-age who is energetic and athletic. Neddy savors the summer day, basking in the pleasures of physical exertion, water, and the sun's warmth.

Neddy notes that his own house is eight miles away, where his four daughters will have just finished lunch, and he realizes that he might be able to return home by water. He imagines the backyard pools from here to his house as a line of uninterrupted water, a river that he names the "Lucinda River" after his wife. Imagining himself as an explorer, he congratulates himself for his creativity and sense of adventure.

Neddy dives into the water, noting that the long-distance stroke he would otherwise use is not socially appropriate in suburban pools. He thinks of the water as his natural condition, and his life outside it as an interruption. When Lucinda asks where he's going, he tells her he's swimming home and disappears behind a hedge.

Neddy plots his course in his mind, listing many neighbors whose pools he will soon traverse. It's a beautiful day, which Neddy thinks of as a gift, and he starts out in a spirit of optimism. He passes into the Grahams' backyard, where Mrs. Graham is having a party; she greets him cheerfully, but insincerely. Neddy thinks of the backyard party as being full of benevolent "natives" whose customs he must diplomatically respect as he makes his way.

Neddy swims through a few more pools until he reaches the Bunkers' property, where Mrs. Bunker—in the midst of a party—greets him in the same insincere way that Mrs. Graham did. Neddy extricates himself from the party as quickly as possible and makes his way to the Levys' backyard. The Levys aren't home, which delights Neddy, and after thoughtlessly ignoring their "private property" sign, he swims the pool in their backyard. By this time, a thunderstorm is brewing, and Neddy finds this exciting. He shelters in the Levys' gazebo until it passes.

Afterwards, the air is chilly and Neddy sees a sign of fall in a blighted tree with red and yellow leaves. Making his away across a few more yards, he notes that a few neighbors seem to have gone away. He's surprised that the Welchers are gone for good; their house is boarded up and their pool has been drained, interrupting the Lucinda River. Bewildered by the Welchers' absence, he notes that he's "disciplined in the repression of unpleasant facts" and it seems to be affecting his memory.

To continue his journey, Neddy has to pass a busy, dirty road. Passing drivers mock and jeer at him, and it's a long and arduous task to cross the road safely. He's so unnerved by the experience that he begins to question why he set out on this quest at all, but he resolves to continue since he's come so far.

Next, Neddy has to cross a public pool, which he finds unpleasant: the rules, the chemically treated water, the jostling swimmers, and the lifeguards inspecting him for identification bother him. He tries to imagine it as just a "stagnant stretch" of the Lucinda river.

Afterwards, Neddy crosses into a more secluded, wooded area where Mr. and Mrs. Halloran live. The Hallorans, an extremely wealthy older couple, are eccentrics: they're rumored to have Communist politics and they spend time in their backyard completely naked. Their pool is fed by a brook, which is more to Neddy's taste than the public pool. Seeing Neddy, Mrs. Halloran expresses her condolences that he lost his house and his daughters, but Neddy responds that he can't remember anything at all about that. Clearly unsettled, Mrs. Halloran doesn't pursue the subject.

After swimming the Hallorans' pool, Neddy becomes depressed. He feels as if his strength has entirely given out, and the air is cold with an unseasonable hint of woodsmoke. He resolves to find a **drink** to restore him, so he walks to the house that the Hallorans' daughter Helen shares with her husband Eric. Helen apologizes that she has nothing in the house to drink because of Eric's operation three years ago—this is another unpleasant fact that Neddy seems to have forgotten. He's repelled by the scar on Eric's stomach because it hides his navel, which Neddy sees as an interruption in the chain of life.

For a drink, Helen points Neddy towards the Biswangers' party, and Neddy heads that way after extending an insincere invitation to have Helen and Eric over sometime. He notes that the Biswangers constantly invite him and Lucinda over for dinner, but Neddy and Lucinda always refuse because the Biswangers are boring and distasteful, always discussing the "price of things." Neddy approaches their house thinking he'll be welcomed, but Mrs. Biswanger calls him a "gate crasher" and insults him. He continues into the party, and a bartender serves him coldly. Neddy can hear people talking behind his back about a time when he showed up drunk and asked for money.

The next pool belongs to Shirley Adams, his old mistress, and he thinks the best thing to restore his energy will be a tryst with her. He remembers that Shirley wept when he broke off their affair, but from his perspective it was casual and lighthearted. Neddy approaches Shirley in her backyard, but she's confused and hurt to see him. When he tells her about his quest to swim across the county, she tells him to "grow up."

Leaving Shirley's place, Neddy is more dispirited than ever. He looks up and sees winter constellations on a summer day, and he begins to cry in despair and bewilderment. He's wounded by his treatment at the Biswangers' party and the feelings of pain, exhaustion, and age in his body.

Neddy swims the last pool on his way home, but he's so tired

that he can barely make it across. He hobbles up the driveway to his house like an old man, and he's surprised to see that the house is dark; it's locked and appears abandoned. As Neddy shouts and bangs on the doors, he looks inside and sees that it's empty.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Neddy Merrill – Neddy, the story's protagonist, is an athletic man, probably in his 30s or 40s, who lives in an unnamed suburb. At the beginning of the story, Neddy lives a comfortable, prosperous life with his wife Lucinda and his four daughters. One glorious summer Sunday, while out on a social call, he resolves to swim all the way to his house using only his neighbors' **swimming pools**. As Neddy swims, Cheever reveals that his most significant quality is his inability to face difficult emotions. He has almost totally repressed any unpleasant memories, instead engaging with life only on a physical level, reveling in the summer weather and the feel of the water. However, as Neddy gets closer to home, time seems to accelerate (a single afternoon stretches into seasons and years), and his life disintegrates—he has lost his wife and daughters, his finances are a mess, and even his body begins to degrade as his strength flags and he begins to seem old. Cheever suggests that Neddy's singleminded focus on swimming home through pools—a vain and ridiculous pursuit meant to preserve the exquisite pleasure of a summer moment—embodies his whole approach to life, which causes him to lose his family, his youth, his money, and his friends.

Lucinda – At the beginning of the story, Lucinda is Neddy Merrill's wife, but, by the end, she and their four daughters have left him. Neddy collectively names the series of swimming **pools** he swims "the Lucinda River," perhaps in an unconscious act of contrition for his failures as a husband and father.

Mrs. Graham – As Neddy swims across the county, he emerges into the backyard of Mrs. Graham (one of his more distant neighbors) to swim through her **pool**. Mrs. Graham greets Neddy by exclaiming "what a marvelous surprise" in a way that feels insincere. In that way, she's similar to Mrs. Bunker, both of whom embody the social affectations that Cheever suggests are typical among suburban residents. While Neddy is in Mrs. Graham's backyard, two "carloads of friends" arrive, setting the tone that suburban life is mostly about entertaining.

Mrs. Bunker – Mrs. Bunker is another of Neddy's neighbors. She's hosting a party as Neddy arrives, and she's surprised to see him, as Lucinda had previously called to tell her they weren't coming. Mrs. Bunker speaks with hyperbolic insincerity, telling Neddy, "When Lucinda said that you couldn't come I thought I'd *die*." Although Neddy seems indifferent to Mrs. Bunker, he enjoys the party, as it's another occasion for him to get a **drink**.

Mrs. Levy – Mrs. Levy is a neighbor who isn't home when Neddy arrives, but there are signs everywhere that she was just entertaining and left suddenly. While the Levys have a "private property sign," Neddy spends time in their backyard anyway, taking liberties with their home that would presumably make them uncomfortable. Mrs. Levy owns a set of Japanese lanterns from Kyoto, which is one of the first occasions for Neddy to question his extremely unreliable memory.

The Welchers – The Welchers are neighbors who have moved away by the time Neddy arrives at their house. While he doesn't remember that they've left, he intuits it from the "for sale" sign on their property and their drained **pool**. Neddy's inability to remember that the Welchers have moved is one of the first clear indications of his complete repression of uncomfortable realities.

Mrs. Halloran – An older woman who is one of the wealthier residents of their town. Mrs. Halloran and her husband are known eccentrics: they are often naked in their backyard, and she takes pleasure in local speculation about her communist politics (although Neddy notes that she's merely a "reformer"). Mrs. Halloran is closer to Neddy than the other neighbors, and she's the only neighbor to explicitly offer comfort and try to get Neddy to confront his painful memories.

Helen – Helen is the Hallorans' only daughter, and she lives right next to the Hallorans in a house they built for her. Cheever implies that Helen is close with her parents, both personally and financially. As a result of her husband, Eric Sachs, having health issues, they don't keep **alcohol** in the house, which frustrates Neddy when he needs a drink. Neddy isn't really interested in Helen's company, which he demonstrates by leaving them with an insincere and vague invitation to get together.

Mrs. Biswanger – Mrs. Biswanger, one of Neddy's neighbors, is having a party as Neddy arrives in her backyard. For years, she has invited Neddy and Lucinda to dinner regularly, but they have turned her down every time because her parties consist of boring professionals who talk constantly about "the price of things." While Neddy believes that he will be welcomed at the Biswangers' party, Mrs. Biswanger insults Neddy in a way that shows she was clearly hurt by his refusal to attend her previous events. This episode illustrates Neddy's self-absorption, as he assumed he could continue to be respected and admired despite his poor treatment of others.

Shirley Adams – Neddy's former mistress. Neddy had broken up with her after what he thought was a lighthearted affair, but she had "wept," showing that Neddy is too focused on his own pleasure to understand how badly he hurt her. After his rejection at the Biswangers, Neddy seeks Shirley out to restore his spirits. He wants not "love," but rather "sexual roughhouse" in order to bolster his mood. Shirley (of course) is confused and

hurt to see him, and she punctures Neddy's self-delusion by telling him to "grow up.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Eric Sachs – Eric is Helen's husband. Three years ago, he had a serious operation that left distinct scars on his abdomen and removed his navel. The sight of these scars disgusts Neddy, who fears an unnatural body with "no link to birth."

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE NATURAL VS. THE ARTIFICIAL

As Neddy Merrill swims across the county, he tries to make a wilderness out of the well-kept **pools** of suburbia, reimagining them as a unified body of water. His progress across the county shows him tapping into a more elemental, less civilized part of himself as he soaks in the physical sensations of the day and removes his clothing, but the effort falters badly as he's diverted across a highway and through a public pool with enforced rules and deadening chemicals. Afterwards, he can't recapture the feeling of beating a new path through uncharted territory, so he turns in desperation to the modern comforts of a drink, a party, and a mistress. In this way, Cheever suggests that suburban men, in order to consider themselves virile and powerful in an environment tailored to their comfort, must emphasize the natural over the artificial to the point of delusion and vanity.

The journey of the story begins with an inaugural act of imagination: Neddy "seemed to see, with a cartographer's eye, that string of swimming pools, that quasi-subterranean stream that curved across the county." It's this powerful metaphor—insisting that the pools make up a river winding through the suburbs—that creates a wilderness out of the neighborhood and enables Neddy's notion of himself as a legendary explorer. Alongside Neddy's delusions of grandeur, swimming home allows him to delight in embracing a more basic human nature, one seemingly divorced from the rules and responsibilities of suburban life. Neddy thinks of himself as an Edenic, prelapsarian man: at the beginning of the journey, swimming "was less a pleasure, it seemed, than the resumption of a natural condition." Furthermore, Neddy's desire to be naked ("He would have liked to swim without trunks, but this was not possible") emphasizes his need to throw off the confinements of propriety and engage with life on a purely physical plane.

But all too quickly, modern life catches up to Neddy. Like Robinson Crusoe returning to Europe from his life on an island, Neddy re-enters society in a painful way when he encounters a drained pool and must cross a highway. Cheever describes him "standing barefoot in the deposits of the highway—beer cans, rags, and blowout patches—exposed to all kinds of ridicule," as if the world is determined to tear down the fantasy that he is a pioneer traversing an uncharted landscape. Afterwards, descriptions of chemicals—"chlorine" and the "reek of suntan oil"—follow him as he attempts to cross the public pool. Here, it takes an extra effort of will to persist in his imagined world: "he reminded himself that he was an explorer, a pilgrim, and that this was merely a stagnant bend in the Lucinda River."

However, it's *not* just a "stagnant bend in the Lucinda River"; even at Neddy's most ecstatic, the artificial elements of modern life follow him in the form of social dictates. He observes that "his life was not confining," but even before he starts his journey, he's hemmed in by the norms of his suburban neighborhood, from his understanding that he must keep his swim trunks on to his acquiescence to using the crawl (a swimming stroke that is considered proper, but which is not good for swimming long distances). From the beginning, then, his attempt to make a wilderness of the suburbs is colored by his awareness of what is "customary." His language of "domestication" in reference to the crawl provides further evidence that he sees his life as something natural and wild which has been hemmed in by the world around him. This constriction escalates as the story continues and he encounters more and more signs that limit his movement ("PRIVATE PROPERTY" or "FOR SALE"). At the public pool, Neddy meekly agrees to wash his feet just as the sign directs him.

By repeatedly pointing to the ways that the modern world intervenes into the untrammeled landscape of Neddy's imagination, Cheever casts Neddy's attempt to "explore" this suburb as a doomed, even pathetic undertaking. Furthermore, Cheever seems to suggest that any effort to reawaken a more primal self in the suburbs will meet the same failure. The pools that Neddy wants to imagine as a rushing river weaving through the uncharted parts of the map are, in the end, just pools. In fact, pools are a sign that the natural world has been completely domesticated, as they enclose water—a powerful element in its natural state—into tidy, privately-owned rectangles. In the suburbs, people have tried to recreate the garden of Eden—a world of untroubled beauty and pleasure—but artifice, especially in the form of rules and norms, is always present.

DELUSION AND REPRESSION

At the beginning of the story, Neddy's life seems wonderful: he and his wife, Lucinda, are sitting around his neighbor's **pool** on a glorious summer day, and he's so happy that he wants to "gulp into his lungs the

components of that moment." However, over the course of Neddy's swim across the county, this wonderful life unravels without clear cause: the weather sours and then turns autumnal while Cheever gives clues that Neddy has suffered "misfortunes," including the dissolution of his family, money troubles, **alcohol** abuse, and a fall from social grace that makes him unwelcome in his community. Cheever allows for some ambiguity as to what has happened: Neddy's swim seems to take only a few hours, but the seasons turning and the significant changes in Neddy and his neighbors' lives suggest that much more time has passed than just a summer afternoon. One interpretation of this ambiguity is that Neddy's fixation on swimming across the county represents his tendency to live immersed in delusion, pursuing pleasure while refusing to grapple with pain and difficulty. Therefore, his afternoon of swimming stands in for an adult life of repressing pain and chasing pleasure, a vain and immature attitude that causes his life to devolve without him being able to acknowledge it, let alone prevent it from happening.

Throughout the story, Cheever makes clear that Neddy is ruled by the pursuit of pleasure. His swim across the county comes from his desire to prolong a moment of poolside bliss, which shows the lengths to which Neddy will go to maintain a good feeling. Furthermore, Neddy's sense of self is entirely driven by his feelings in the moment. If the weather is pleasant and the water feels good, he's happy—but if his thoughts turn to unpleasant memories or if there's a chill in the air, he falls into despair. Likewise, his appetite for the pleasure of a drink sometimes determines his path and his mood. When "a smiling bartender he had seen at a hundred parties [gives] him a gin and tonic," he's happy. But later, when he feels he needs a drink—"a stimulant"—and cannot get one, he almost falls apart. Neddy is perpetually looking for the one pleasure that will end any malaise. In a moment of desperation, as his swimming begins to sour, he concludes that "love—sexual roughhouse in fact—was the supreme elixir, the pain killer, the brightly colored pill," and he seeks out his former mistress. The way he thinks about her as just another pleasure to relieve his anguish reveals his constant need to escape from the discomfort of his reality, as well as the immature way in which he sees other people as instruments of escape or pleasure, rather than as full people.

Neddy's inability to empathize with others is related to his pursuit of pleasure, as fully grappling with the desires and hardships of others would undermine Neddy's selfish quest to experience only delight. For example, when a plane passes overhead while a thunderstorm is brewing, "it seemed to Ned that he could almost hear the pilot laugh with pleasure." Encountering a situation in which someone would reasonably feel terror—flying through a coming storm—Neddy decides only to see carefree pleasure. His inability to understand the pain of others also extends to the mistress he abandoned: "It had been, he thought, a lighthearted affair, although she had wept when he broke it off." The tension between those two halves of the sentence is further proof that Neddy is as unwilling to grapple with others' pain as his own. In this light, when Cheever presents the mysterious reversals of fortune among the neighbors or the deterioration of Neddy's own family, readers might assume that Neddy was so selfishly unable to empathize with those around him that his relationships fell apart without him acknowledging it.

Over the course of the story, Cheever becomes more explicit that Neddy has sabotaged himself through his repression of any unpleasant knowledge or feeling. At first, his inability to acknowledge unpleasant aspects of reality simply deprives him of the information he needs to make choices: confused that he can't swim through the empty pool in the house his neighbors have apparently vacated, Neddy asks "Was his memory failing or had he so disciplined it in the repression of unpleasant facts that he had damaged his sense of the truth?" It seems as though the latter is true, and as the story progresses, Neddy's inability to acknowledge the pain he has caused others begins to put him in situations that are humiliating and unpleasant. For example, despite that Neddy deeply hurt the Biswangers' feelings by rejecting their invitations, he approaches their house thinking "They would be honored to give him a drink, they would be happy to give him a drink." And even after they humiliate and rebuff him, he assumes the same implausible goodwill of the mistress he dumped. Neddy also seems immune to redemption. When Mrs. Halloran makes probably the only authentic attempt to console Neddy, he rebuffs her, claiming not to recall having sold his house, because the alternative is engaging with his pain. This insistent refusal to engage with unpleasant realities leads Neddy to return to his house only to find it abandoned and dark. His self-delusion, rather than preserving a façade of contented family life, has caused him to lose it forever.

Neddy has studiously avoided the "unpleasantness" in his life, such that when he's finally forced to look his life in the face, he finds it a smoking wreck. Neddy Merrill is a perfect creature of the suburbs that Cheever so bitterly criticizes: he chases comfort and pleasure while suppressing any of the difficulties of life, to the ruin of himself and others. Cheever's conclusion is that people feel pain for a reason: it's an indicator of issues that need to be addressed and resolved before they wreak destruction on people's lives.

SUBURBAN ALIENATION

When Cheever wrote "The Swimmer," suburban life—which promised blissful and affordable living after the horrors of the Second World War—was booming. The suburbs of "The Swimmer," however, do not enable the characters to live an ideal life. Neddy Merrill views his suburban neighbors almost uniformly as obstacles and inconveniences. Indeed, as the story progresses, readers begin

to see suburban life as nothing more than an exhausting progression of façades and obligations: invitations are extended and rejected, **drinks** are drunk, small talk is made, and appearances are maintained. The pettiness and despair of the suburban neighborhood Cheever depicts suggests that the things people expect to make them happy—such as money, friendly relationships, and social cohesion—are often what causes the deepest despair.

Cheever uses repetition to emphasize the monotony and homogeneity of the suburbs and its residents. As the story opens, everyone speaks versions of the same phrase: "I *drank* too much." This repetition extends to nearly every aspect of life in Cheever's suburbs—the sequence of pools, the identical conversations, the bartender Neddy has seen "a hundred" times at other parties—and it numbs both residents and the reader. Furthermore, the bewildering catalogue of neighbors (Westerhazy, Halloran, Levy, Biswanger) come too fast for the reader to make much distinction between them, suggesting that residents of the suburbs themselves are basically clones of one another without significant distinguishing features. In fact, even the neighbors who differ from the norm seem to do so superficially and for entertainment, rather than out of authentic eccentricity. For example, the Hallorans "seemed to bask in the suspicion that they might be Communists," although Cheever suggests that they aren't communists—they're typical suburban residents who are titillated by the air of subversion that communism gives their lives.

Neddy seems to know everyone, which appears to be a benefit of life in the suburbs, but these relationships are shallow and they fail to make him happy. For example, most of the conversations Cheever depicts aren't attempts to communicate honestly. The neighbors who receive Neddy with variations of the same phrase ("what a marvelous surprise") seem to be saying the pleasantries expected of them, but these statements seem neither specific to Neddy nor genuinely felt. Furthermore, Cheever uses italics to call attention to the hyperbole and insincerity of suburban speech, as when Enid Bunker tells Neddy, "When Lucinda said that you couldn't come I thought I'd *die*." Neddy himself speaks this way: he tells Helen (obviously insincerely) that "Lucinda and I want *terribly* to see you…We're sorry it's been so long and we'll call you *very* soon." The shallow insincerity of these friendships becomes most apparent in the fact that only one neighbor—Mrs. Halloran, the least traditionally suburban of all—seems to offer genuine sympathy for Neddy's plight. Clearly, this is a community that is not caring for one another, a trend Neddy himself embodies, as he cannot even remember the misfortunes of his neighbors.

Finally, Cheever suggests that wealth is a defining feature of the suburbs that alienates suburbanites instead of making them happy. While all the characters are clearly wealthy (everyone, for example, has a pool and a lawn), suburbanites are clearly supposed to display their wealth but never speak of it. Those who violate this social code (such as the Biswangers, who talk about "the prices of things") are considered crass and worthy of contempt. This shows that, while wealth can buy a house in the suburbs, it cannot buy entry into suburban social life, which also requires fluency with upper-class cultural norms. Furthermore, wealth is an unstable condition, and when people's fortunes fall (as Neddy's do), they quickly lose membership in suburban society, no matter how respected they once were. This becomes clear at the Biswanger's party, where Neddy is ridiculed for having violated the behavioral norms of suburban life by showing up drunk and begging for money. Instead of having compassion for Neddy's clear desperation, his neighbors are disgusted that he would speak of money outright, particularly in the context of needing it.

Cheever therefore suggests that conformity, wealth, and social obligation give rise to relationships that are more performative than caring. The suburbs are a place with lots of talk, but little dialogue; lots of wealth, but not enough security; and many neighbors, but few friends. Perversely, the things that were supposed to alleviate alienation (wealth, social relationships, and homogeneity) give rise to monotony, personal disconnection, and insincerity, an alienating—and peculiarly suburban—combination.

TIME

"The Swimmer" depicts the passage of time at three superimposed levels. One is the course of a single Sunday—the "real" timeline on which the story plays out. Another is the accelerated passage of seasons, as the story begins in high summer and then descends into fall and winter. The third (and most important) timeline is the course of Neddy's adult life. Cheever uses these superimposed timelines to emphasize how subjective the feeling of time passing can be, and how quickly an entire life can pass by, especially when it's spent in pursuit of shallow pleasure.

Despite being a middle-aged man, Neddy begins his journey with the "slenderness of youth." During his first few laps in the **pool**, he showcases his virility and strength, jumping headlong into the water and vaulting out on the other side. This vitality gives the sense that the story opens near the beginning of Neddy's life, when possibilities are still open to him and he can still seize his own destiny. However, by playing on the association of summer with youth and winter with old age, Cheever troubles Neddy's apparent youth. As Neddy performs his morning routine, Cheever observes ominously that "he might have been compared to a summer's day, particularly the last hours of one." This line echoes the opening of Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" Despite summer's association with youth and beauty, Shakespeare's poem engages themes of impermanence and decay, since the defining characteristic of summer is that its beauty is fleeting. Even at the outset, Cheever plants the seeds

of Neddy's old age and frailty—readers shouldn't be surprised, then, that Neddy begins to feel his age (his limbs becoming rubbery and weak until his swimming becomes a desperate struggle) just as "Leaves were falling down around him and he smelled wood smoke on the wind."

Even as Neddy's body ages swiftly, however, Cheever maintains that, emotionally speaking, Neddy is still a child. This mismatch between his physical and emotional age is the source of his suffering. Like a child, Neddy bounces from delight to delight and seems to lack emotional maturity or the capacity for self-reflection. After noticing that the Welchers have moved away, for instance, Neddy has the opportunity to reflect on the fact that his life is passing and his neighbors are experiencing misfortune, but instead he gets distracted: "in the distance he heard the sound of a tennis game. This cheered him, cleared away all his apprehensions." Furthermore, even as his body ages, Neddy continues to rely on his boyish optimism and naiveté, which is off-putting and even unacceptable in a middle-aged man. By clinging to his youthful emotions, he confuses and frustrates those close to him by behaving without empathy (towards the Biswangers, for instance), neglecting his responsibilities to his family, and engaging in ridiculous pleasures, such as swimming across the county. Indeed, when he tells his spurned mistress Shirley that he has come to her house unannounced in order to swim home, she says, "Good Christ. Will you ever grow up?" It's perfectly reasonable that she would be frustrated that a childish and pointless game is more important to him than protecting her emotional wellbeing by avoiding her yard after breaking up with her.

More broadly, Neddy's swim home—with its invented constraints and dubious achievements—is a way of avoiding the pressing concerns of adulthood. While Neddy is immersed in swimming home, the home that is ostensibly his destination is disintegrating without his knowledge: his wife and daughters leave him, he goes broke, and he loses his house. Neddy's aging body might have been a clue that, in the course of his swim, he should have reconsidered whether his youthful quest was still worthwhile—whether "this prank, this joke, this piece of horseplay" should fill all his time—but he never seriously engages the question. As a result, by the time he reaches home, he's an elderly man, "stooped, holding on to the gateposts for support," and left with only a "vague" sense of triumph and an empty house. In this light, Cheever's superimposed timelines—the seasons changing and an adult life passing, all in the course of a summer afternoon—show how quickly a person's problems can get the best of them if they fail to grapple with those problems as they arise. Neddy's own mismatched personal timeline (his emotional immaturity coupled with his aging body) leaves him unable to seize the important parts of his life, focusing instead on youthful pleasures that leave him with no lasting sense of meaning or adult accomplishment.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

SWIMMING POOLS

In "The Swimmer," Neddy Merill swims home through a chain of suburban swimming pools, which he imagines is actually the "Lucinda River," a wild river flowing into unexplored territory. These pools—the focal points of idyllic midsummer afternoons—represent the desire of the suburban upper-middle class to control their environment by repressing unpleasantness or ugliness of any kind. Indeed, Ned's characterization of the pools as the wild "Lucinda River" obscures the reality of the situation: the river is actually a disconnected series of suburban backyard pools, each one boxed-in and often sanitized with chemicals, surrounded by neighbors offering cocktails. Characterizing the pools as the "Lucinda River," however, enables Neddy's image of himself as a primal man battling his environment through his unique strength and adventurousness, or an explorer charting a course through an untouched landscape. In reality, though, Ned is clearly a vain suburban socialite wandering through domesticated backyards he has seen many times during parties. These suburban residents curate their backyards like Neddy curates his life, choosing only the pleasurable or beautiful elements and casting out all that is ugly. Regardless, though, the ugliness is always present: backyard swimming pools are the sites of confrontations with mistresses, spurned neighbors, and fawning but hollow conversations, and Neddy's swim along the river sours when his immersion in fantasy can no longer obscure his ruined life. In the end, the pools drive home the futility of trying to banish discomfort and displeasure from life.

ALCOHOL

In "The Swimmer," alcohol symbolizes Neddy's short-sighted hedonism, showing that pleasure pursued too hungrily ends in disaster. Cheever announces the significance of alcohol to the social life of the suburbs in the first paragraph of the story, where hungover residents complain that they "drank too much" the night before. Immediately, Cheever links alcohol with excess and regret, but he introduces Neddy as he's still in the early stages of intoxication, at the pool with a hand around "a glass of gin." As he swims through his neighbors' backyards, Neddy finds a drink at nearly every stop, a social courtesy that, at first, he accepts and enjoys: stumbling on the Bunkers' party, he admires "prosperous men and women gathered by the sapphire colored waters while caterer's men in white coats passed them cold gin." However, Cheever's portrayal of alcohol changes as Neddy

gets further into his swim (and, presumably, gets drunker). While trespassing in the Levys' empty backyard, Neddy swims in the pool then helps himself to a drink all alone—here, alcohol becomes less a social pleasure than a compulsion. This becomes explicit after he swims in the Hallorans' pool and thinks to himself for the first time that he *needs* a drink to maintain his mood; from here on, finding alcohol is nearly as important to Neddy as his quest to swim home. Indeed, the notion that alcohol might be a problem for Neddy becomes clearest at the Biswangers' party, where people are gossiping that Neddy had once "showed up drunk" and asked for a loan. Throughout the story, alcohol mirrors Neddy's foolish quest to swim the county: it's a light pleasure that turns into an all-consuming compulsion, one that poisons his life and ruins his relationships to others.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Stories of John Cheever* published in 2000.

The Swimmer Quotes

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.

Related Characters: Neddy Merrill

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 603

Explanation and Analysis

Cheever sets the tone for "The Swimmer" with a number of suburban residents of different classes and vocations repeating the same phrase, "I *drank* too much." By placing these varying people in the same hungover condition, Cheever emphasizes the narrow range of experience possible in the suburbs. Each one is in church, on the golf course, or at the wildlife preserve on Sunday, but on Saturday they were all drinking. Cheever describes these people as similar in their pursuit of an excessive pleasure that inevitably leads to pain and regret the next morning.

Additionally, this passage stresses the importance of alcohol to this social fabric. It's a drug both destructive and acceptable to polite society.

He was a slender man—he seemed to have the especial slenderness of youth—and while he was far from young he had slid down his banister that morning and given the bronze backside of Aphrodite on the hall table a smack, as he jogged toward the smell of coffee in his dining room. He might have been compared to a summer's day, particularly the last hours of one, and while he lacked a tennis racket or a sail bag the impression was definitely one of youth, sport, and clement weather.

Related Characters: Neddy Merrill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 603

Explanation and Analysis

Cheever describes Neddy Merrill as younger than his years might indicate. For one, he's "slender," which implies an athletic constitution. The action of sliding down the bannister is similarly associated with youth and its impulses to rebel or break convention. Furthermore, Aphrodite is the Greek goddess of love, and Neddy's lascivious "smack" speaks of his sexual desire and virility, despite being "far from young." But beyond his physical prowess, Neddy appears untroubled, with the easy confidence of a younger man. The impression of "clement weather" reveals a sunny optimism, whereas a man his age might be expected to have picked up a few dark clouds. The overall picture is of a man who privileges his physical body and more carnal impulses, rather than his emotional or mental life.

He seemed to see, with a cartographer's eye, that string of swimming pools, that quasi-subterranean stream that curved across the county. He had made a discovery, a contribution to modern geography; he would name the stream Lucinda after his wife. He was not a practical joker nor was he a fool but he was determinedly original and had a vague and modest idea of himself as a legendary figure.

Related Characters: Neddy Merrill (speaker), Lucinda

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 603-604

Explanation and Analysis

Neddy hatches his plan to swim across the county, which drives the entire story, by drawing an equivalence between swimming pools and rivers. Swimming pools are bounded, owned, and sterile, but Neddy transforms them into a "stream" in his imagination. He interprets this "discovery" in grandiose terms, to the extent that the "vague and modest idea of himself as a legendary figure" reads as satire. His legendary self-image strains against the trivial nature of the quest, and Neddy's protestations that he isn't a "fool" only make him seem more foolish. The fact that Neddy's idea of himself is "vague" further marks him as a man who doesn't indulge in self-examination. He's happy not to look too closely at this absurd vision of himself.

> As soon as Enid Bunker saw him she began to scream: "Oh, look who's here! What a marvelous surprise! When Lucinda said that you couldn't come I thought I'd die." She made her way to him through the crowd, and when they had finished kissing she led him to the bar, a progress that was slowed by the fact that he stopped to kiss eight or ten other women and shake the hands of as many men.

Related Characters: Neddy Merrill (speaker), Mrs. Bunker

Related Themes:

Page Number: 605

Explanation and Analysis

Neddy is just setting out on his journey when he stumbles on a party in the Bunkers' backyard. Immediately, the first sentence is jarring, as Enid Bunker's scream is both startling and ambiguous. Until she speaks, readers are not sure if she's screaming in joy or dismay. The answer might be somewhere in the middle, as Mrs. Bunker's hyperbolic reaction belies a performative impulse. Mrs. Bunker repeats Mrs. Graham's exclamation ("what a marvelous surprise!) in a sign that this reaction is rote and doesn't say much about her feelings for Neddy in particular. She says, "I thought I'd die" as a clearly insincere way to express affection. The ritual of kissing women and shaking hands with men also point to a social performance all out of proportion to emotional closeness.

> Then there was a fine noise of rushing water from the crown of an oak at his back, as if a spigot there had been turned. Then the noise of fountains came from the crowns of all the tall trees. Why did he love storms, what was the meaning of his excitement when the door sprang open and the rain wind fled rudely up the stairs, why had the simple task of shutting the windows of an old house seemed fitting and urgent.

Related Characters: Neddy Merrill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 606

Explanation and Analysis

Neddy hides under the Levys' gazebo to wait out an oncoming thunderstorm. Thunderstorms are pure expressions of natural fury, which may explain Neddy's affection for them, as he seems inordinately concerned with what's "natural." But when the rain falls, Neddy thinks of it in thoroughly artificial, even domestic terms. The water falls as if a "spigot there had been turned." Additionally, the "noise of fountains" describes a water feature someone might have in their yard, rather than an effect of weather. And Neddy remembers "shutting the windows" against the storm, rather than running out to greet it. This failure of imagination illustrates that Neddy, a suburban man, is too conditioned by artificial comforts to think of storms except in those terms.

> The rain had cooled the air and he shivered. The force of the wind had stripped a maple of its red and yellow leaves and scattered them over the grass and the water. Since it was midsummer the tree must be blighted, and yet he felt a peculiar sadness at this sign of autumn. He braced his shoulders, emptied his glass, and started for the Welchers' pool.

Related Characters: Neddy Merrill (speaker), The Welchers

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 606

Explanation and Analysis

Emerging after the storm, Neddy notices red and yellow leaves on a maple tree, an unmistakable sign of fall. Additionally, the air is so cold that Neddy shivers, an

unseasonable contrast to the earlier heat of the summer day. He quickly disposes of the idea that it is fall, insisting (against all evidence) that "it was midsummer." This shows that Neddy is oblivious to the passage of time, searching for alternate explanations because its passage clearly disturbs him (as it parallels his physical aging, which he cannot confront). To dispel his sadness, Neddy braces and finishes his drink, attempting to ignore the effect of time. It's also worth noting that Neddy is drinking alone here in a time of distress in order to ward off unsettling ideas—this is an indication that his drinking might be a problem.

Was his memory failing or had he so disciplined it in the repression of unpleasant facts that he had damaged his sense of the truth? Then in the distance he heard the sound of a tennis game. This cheered him, cleared away all his apprehensions and let him regard the overcast sky and the cold air with indifference.

Related Characters: Neddy Merrill (speaker), The Welchers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 607

Explanation and Analysis

After realizing that the Welchers have moved away, Neddy suspects that he doesn't remember them moving not because he never knew, but because he has willfully forgotten. It's clear that the discipline Neddy exerts over his thoughts has been a long process, as it actually has damaged his sense of truth and reality. It also casts doubt on Neddy's perception of reality going forward, now that readers know he's an unreliable narrator even to himself. But this troubling realization doesn't prompt serious introspection or a change of behavior in Neddy. The sound of a distant tennis game and the simple pleasure it offers is all it takes for Neddy to drop the subject. The fact that the sound of tennis "cleared away all his apprehensions" shows that his sense of worry is shallow and transient. His desire for truth is less powerful than his aversion to pain.

He took a shower, washed his feet in a cloudy and bitter solution, and made his way to the edge of the water. It stank of chlorine and looked to him like a sink. A pair of lifeguards in a pair of towers blew police whistles at what seemed to be regular intervals and abused the swimmers through a public address system. Neddy remembered the sapphire water at the Bunkers' with longing and thought that he might contaminate himself—damage his own prosperousness and charm —by swimming in this murk, but he reminded himself that he was an explorer, a pilgrim, and that this was merely a stagnant bend in the Lucinda River.

Related Characters: Neddy Merrill (speaker), Mrs. Bunker

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 608

Explanation and Analysis

The public pool that Neddy must cross inverts all the pleasures he takes in swimming. Where he prefers to dive right in, he must now wash himself in a chemical solution. Where he'd prefer to be alone with the water, lifeguards are there to check him. The mention of chemicals in the "cloudy and bitter solution" and the water that "stank of chlorine" challenge Neddy's fantasy of wild natural exploration, and it takes some convincing for him to believe that this is still the "Lucinda River" of his imagination. The "sapphire water at the Bunkers'" might support the idea that he's swimming through a pristine paradise, but the public pool destroys it. This is the pool in the truest form Neddy shrinks from: a sterile rectangle of tamed water.

The Hallorans were friends, an elderly couple of enormous wealth who seemed to bask in the suspicion that they might be Communists. They were zealous reformers but they were not Communists, and yet when they were accused, as they sometimes were, of subversion, it seemed to gratify and excite them.

Related Characters: Neddy Merrill (speaker), Mrs. Halloran

Related Themes:

Page Number: 608

Explanation and Analysis

Among the neighbors that Neddy meets, the Hallorans stand out in a few respects. They're older, extremely wealthy, and politically engaged. But they invite the idea that they're Communists, a political affiliation that would cross the line from tolerable to unacceptable in this 1960s suburb. The way the Hallorans' "bask" in this innuendo, however, suggests that the exaggeration of their political beliefs is just a performance for their neighbors' and their own entertainment. They break the conformity of the suburbs in a way that's completely in line with the social atmosphere of the suburbs. While others conform in order to meet their neighbors' approval, the Hallorans diverge to provide their neighbors with some harmless excitement.

> The swim was too much for his strength but how could he have guessed this, sliding down the banister that morning and sitting in the Westerhazys' sun? His arms were lame. His legs felt rubbery and ached at the joints. The worst of it was the cold in his bones and the feeling that he might never be warm again. Leaves were falling down around him and he smelled wood smoke on the wind.

Related Characters: Neddy Merrill (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 609

Explanation and Analysis

After swimming the Hallorans' pool, Neddy notices that the autumnal weather has taken a turn towards winter. The evidence of accelerated time is all around him: falling leaves, woodsmoke, and bitter cold. Furthermore, the cold is more internal than external: it's "in his bones" and shows no signs of leaving, suggesting that the cold is a feeling born of age and exhaustion, not a quirk of the weather. Cheever has turned the seasons so quickly to emphasize that time passes quickly from a subjective perspective. Only this morning, Neddy's strength felt limitless.

> The next pool on his list, the last but two, belonged to his old mistress, Shirley Adams. If he had suffered any injuries at the Biswangers' they would be cured here. Love—sexual roughhouse in fact—was the supreme elixir, the pain killer, the brightly colored pill that would put the spring back into his step, the joy of life in his heart. They had had an affair last week, last month, last year. He couldn't remember.

Related Characters: Neddy Merrill (speaker), Shirley Adams

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 611

Explanation and Analysis

Neddy eagerly anticipates a visit to his old mistress, assuming that she'll receive him warmly, which shows that he hasn't learned from his humiliation at the Biswangers. He has hurt Shirley just as he hurt the Biswangers, so there's no logical reason that Shirley would receive him any more warmly than his spurned neighbors did. As he thinks of Shirley, he broaches the topic of love, but immediately clarifies that it's only sexual pleasure that he's interested in. Instead of finding solace in a more adult and emotionally fulfilling relationship (or confronting his problems outright to achieve a more stable sense of satisfaction), Neddy seeks out Shirley to restore his strength. And furthermore, he thinks of her just as he did the glass of whiskey that he was chasing earlier. In doing so, he quite literally objectifies her as a drug or medicine, something he can thoughtlessly consume to make himself feel better. His inability to place their affair in time also means he's unwilling to take the pain that resulted from it seriously.

> Looking over his shoulder he saw, in the lighted bathhouse, 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?

Related Characters: Neddy Merrill (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 611

Explanation and Analysis

After leaving Shirley, Neddy confronts the frustrating reality that he has aged and time has slipped away from him. The vision of the young man in the bathhouse contrasts Neddy's current weakness and decrepitude, when only this morning he felt youthful and strong. It's a further sign that Neddy can no longer persist in his former illusions of youth, success, and familial bliss. As if to emphasize that point, his sensory perceptions are intense. The "autumnal fragrance" is "strong as gas" in a sign that it can't be ignored any longer. And the stars are unambiguous, showing unmistakable autumn constellations. While Neddy was underwater, his entire life passed.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE SWIMMER

It is "one of those midsummer Sundays" when everyone is sitting around saying "I *drank* too much last night." Everyone from priests to birdwatchers to golfers moans about their hangovers, and the Westerhazys—sitting around their **pool** with Lucinda and Neddy Merrill—note that all of them drank too much **wine** the night before.

Cheever begins the story with a litany of people saying the same thing. The repetition illustrates that the suburbs offer an extremely narrow range of experience, even among such different people as priests and birdwatchers. The focus on alcohol also reveals the most important way in which suburbanites are alike: seeking self-destructive pleasures.

Neddy, who is lounging by the **pool** drinking **gin**, is "far from young" but still youthful and slender. That morning, he had slid down his bannister and slapped the "bronze backside" of a bust of Aphrodite. Neddy gives an impression of "youth, sport, and clement weather."

Neddy's morning routine speaks to his self-image as a man who feels younger than he is. Slapping the "bronze backside" of the Greek goddess of love shows Neddy insisting on his own virility, even as a man "far from young." Further, the impression of "clement weather" suggests an uncomplicated man, someone untroubled by deep doubts or fears.

Neddy had just been swimming, and right now he's breathing heavily, savoring the physical sensations of that moment as though "he could gulp [it] into his lungs." He notes that his own house, where his four "beautiful daughters" are, is eight miles away, and he has an epiphany that he might be able to return home by water.

Neddy experiences a moment of extreme physical pleasure, which he hopes to honor and prolong by swimming home. An eight-mile swim is an enormous task, but Neddy expects every subsequent swim to be just as pleasing as this one. Therefore, he arranges his day around a vain and ridiculous pursuit.

Neddy's life "was not confining" so his joy in this thought is not about "escape." He imagines, "with a cartographer's eye," a line of **pools** stretching across the county back to his house. This line of pools forms a river in his mind, which he decides to call the "Lucinda river," after his wife. He fancies himself an explorer beating a path into uncharted territory and pledges his quest to the honor of this beautiful day.

Neddy's desire for masculine virility finds expression in the form of the explorer. Through an effort of imagination, he delusionally turns the suburbs into uncharted territory, which suggests that the masculinity and virility he imagines in himself are also somewhat delusional. Grandiose whims like these are hallmarks of a youthful orientation towards life, which is somewhat troubling in a man his age.

Neddy dives into the **pool**, noting his disdain for men who creep down into pools using the steps. His stroke is a crawl, which is not good for long distances, but the crawl is a social convention that he must follow. He feels like the water is more than a pleasure; it's his natural condition. Then, he tells his wife Lucinda that he's swimming home and goes off.

Neddy expresses a dominance over other men by diving into pools rather than stepping into them. Furthermore, he explicitly thinks that being in the water is his "natural" condition, suggesting that swimming is putting him in touch with who he really is. This lacks credibility, however, since he's still so beholden to what the neighbors think, which is evident in his choice of the crawl.

Neddy plots his course through memory and imagination, listing all the neighbors whose swimming **pools** he'll have to cross. He's ecstatic as he starts out, feeling that a world "so generously supplied with water seemed like a clemency, a beneficence." He savors the beautiful weather and imagines that "friends would line the banks of the Lucinda river" as he swims.

As Neddy lists all the neighbors whose pools he plans to cross, the repetition of last names is both bewildering and monotonous. The complexity and tediousness of managing this network of relationships becomes clear. Nevertheless, Neddy is filled with youthful optimism and a naïve belief that he'll find help and support along the way. This speaks to Neddy's self-absorption, in that he believes everyone he meets will share in his childish goal.

Neddy walks through a hedge and past a shed to cross into the Grahams' backyard **pool**. Mrs. Graham welcomes him, claiming that she's been trying to call him all morning to invite him over, and she offers him a drink. Inhabiting the perspective of an explorer, Neddy sees the Grahams as hospitable "natives" whose customs he must respect while trying to get on with his journey without too much delay. He swims the length of their pool and stays with them for a few minutes, then manages to slip away while they receive other friends for an "uproarious reunion."

Mrs. Graham welcomes Neddy and notes in an offhanded way that she's been trying to call him. It's unclear whether this is sincere or simply a social nicety. Already, Neddy is coming to see his neighbors as a burden or impediment, as Mrs. Graham's hospitality keeps him from his journey. The lens of "hospitable natives" preserves the fantasy of a suburban wilderness, but it clashes with exactly how comfortable the natives make Neddy as an arriving explorer.

Back on track, Neddy swims a few other **pools** regardless of whether the owners are home or not. Reaching the Bunkers' backyard, he finds they're having a party. Neddy is buoyed by the sight and rhapsodizes about how "prosperous" the people are on the banks of the Lucinda river. Overhead, a small red airplane is wheeling "with something like the glee of a child on a swing."

The metaphor of Neddy's neighbors as "natives" crosses into satire as he observes them lounging in the pool or waited on by caterers. Cheever allows Neddy's exploration fantasy to appear ridiculous as a way to emphasize how much he's still a creature of civilization. Neddy also allows his good mood to project onto every situation he encounters, even attributing joy to a distant plane.

Mrs. Bunker greets him and insists that Neddy's arrival is a "marvelous surprise" and that she'd "*die*" if he couldn't make it to the party. Neddy goes around making small talk and gets a drink from a bartender he's seen "a hundred times" at similar parties.

Mrs. Bunker greets Neddy in much the same way that Mrs. Graham did, even repeating the words "marvelous surprise." This echoes the repetition of "I drank too much" at the beginning of the story and reveals how much suburban conversation consists of stock phrases. The italics around "die" suggest a specific mode of upper-middle class insincerity, which people use to express more affection than they feel. Furthermore, the bartender that Neddy has seen "a hundred times" suggests that the party itself is a repeated action, another mundane ritual of suburban life.

After swimming the Bunkers' **pool**, Neddy crosses over to the Levys' property, where he sees a "private property" sign. The Levys are away (there are "no signs of life), but they seem to have been recently home, since there are glasses and bottles still left out in the backyard. Despite the sign, he enters their backyard and swims their pool, helping himself to a **drink** afterward. He notes that this is his fourth or fifth drink, and he's only halfway to the end of the "river."

The Levys' absence is haunting, as if they vanished in the middle of entertaining. Neddy is unsettled by the house, but he seeks some relief in the alcohol left out. The mention of his fourth or fifth drink shows just how much artificial support Neddy needs for his journey, and this first instance of him drinking alone makes the reader wonder if drinking is more than just a social pleasure for him.

Neddy notes the natural signs of a storm's approach, as "pinheaded birds" warn of it with their songs. A thunderstorm erupts and Neddy takes shelter in the Levys' gazebo. The rain pours down, and Neddy asks himself why he loves storms so much. He takes pleasure in the approach of a storm as if it were "good news" and remembers the sense of urgency in boarding up his house against one. Rain falls on Mrs. Levy's Japanese lanterns, but Neddy can't remember when it was she went to Japan.

Several natural elements clash with artificial ones as Neddy anticipates the storm. The birds have an instinctual knowledge of the change in the weather, but Neddy thinks of them in derogatory terms: as "pinheaded." Furthermore, instead of being out the in the weather as might suit someone in touch with primitive human nature, Neddy takes refuge under a gazebo, an example of shelter that's especially civilized and sophisticated. While there, the Japanese lanterns give Neddy the sense that his memory is unreliable and that he may not know the Levys' as well as he thinks he does.

After the storm, the air has cooled significantly. A blighted tree in the Levys' yard spills red and yellow leaves, which disquiets Neddy and he "brace[s] his shoulders [and] emptie[s] his glass." An autumnal chill replaces the heat of the summer day.

After the storm, the mood of the day changes completely, becoming more subdued and eerie just as signs of fall (changing leaves, a chill) begin to appear. It's notable that, to fortify himself against these new challenges, Neddy turns to drinking.

Neddy crosses the Lindleys' yard and is confused to see that their horses are gone. He remembers something about it but can't quite pinpoint what happened. He reaches the Welchers' yard and is shocked to see a "for sale" sign out front, with the house boarded and the **pool** drained. He's especially confused because "no one ever drains their pool," and the interruption in the "Lucinda river" distresses him.

The changes in his neighbors' lives upsets Neddy for several reasons, the most important being the gaps that have clearly opened in his memory. But there's a purely practical reason that Neddy is upset: the Welchers drained their pool, which means he can't swim through it to get home. This interrupts his imagined river, so it threatens to jolt him out of his comfortable delusions.

Neddy can't remember when or why the Welchers moved, but he does mention that he tends to repress unpleasant thoughts. He's crestfallen, but the noise of a distant tennis game cheers him and he continues his journey with a renewed sense of elation.

Neddy openly admits to his skill for repressing unpleasant thoughts, and it almost leads him to confront his problems. However, he's immediately distracted by the sound of a tennis game, which is a prime example of how shallow Neddy's emotional world is and how childlike his thoughts are.

Neddy has to cross Route 424, a busy road lined with trash. He'd known he'd have to do so but was unprepared for drivers mocking and throwing cans at him, presumably for trying to cross a major road in a bathing suit. The road is filled with "beer cans, rags, and blowout patches."

Here, Neddy's imagined uncharted wilderness faces a reality check. Route 424 is full of all the unpleasantness of modern life. While Neddy could sustain his fantasy when the natives were friendly people milling near the pool, he can't when they're obnoxious drivers throwing cans and insults.

His unpleasant experience crossing the road makes Neddy question his plan to swim home. He tries to recapture the pleasure he experienced at the Westerhazys' **pool**, which initially sparked the journey. He wonders whether he lacks "common sense" for continuing, but he has no choice, as he's already covered too much ground to return. Neddy asks himself, "At what point had this prank, this joke, this piece of horseplay become serious?"

Neddy has a full-blown crisis, one that might even be understood as a mid-life crisis. He observes how far he is from the initial pleasures that set him out on this quest. The first few pools stand in for youth, where life seems less complex and there are fewer obstacles. Now, facing resistance, Neddy questions the choices that led him to this point, just as everyone approaching the middle of their lives might.

He comes to a public **pool** where he's greeted with a sign requiring him to wash his feet before entering. The pool is filled with loud and rowdy swimmers, and Neddy recoils at the chlorine used to clean it and the smell of suntan oil. He tries to convince himself it's just a "stagnant stretch" of the Lucinda river and he struggles across, jostled by swimmers and yelled at by lifeguards.

Neddy's vision of a wilderness in the suburbs finally snaps at the public pool. The mention of chemicals (the chlorine and suntan oil) marks the distance between a pool and a pristine river. He also faces artificial intrusions into his desire to swim according to his nature: he's forced to clean himself before entering and the lifeguards harass him for not following the rules. Previously, any rules he followed were self-imposed.

After emerging from the public **pool**, Neddy crosses into a quieter wooded area owned by the Hallorans. Neddy describes them as a very wealthy older couple who have left-wing politics and enjoy the implication that they might be Communists, although they're only "reformers." They also have a sort of house rule where nudity is allowed in their backyard, so Neddy removes his swim trunks before entering.

After a traumatic experience at the public pool, the wooded area of the Hallorans' property, as well as their tendency to swim naked (which Neddy had longed for), seems to offer some relief. But woven into these natural tendencies are more suburban concerns. The Hallorans, by breaking the conventions of their neighborhood, are actually providing the kind of tame disobedience that's acceptable in the suburbs. The Hallorans show off these light eccentricities for the benefit of their neighbors, rather than out of an authentic political commitment.

As Neddy passes into the Hallorans' backyard, he notices a yellow beech hedge and Mrs. Halloran fishing beech leaves out of the **pool**. Neddy focuses on the pool, which is the oldest in the county. It's a natural pool fed by a brook with "no filter or pump."

Neddy sees a yellow beech hedge and assumes it's another blighted plant (rather than a sign of advancing seasons and, correspondingly, his advancing age). Despite these disquieting signs, the Hallorans' pool is roughly cut out of fieldstone and fed by a natural source, which should help Neddy return to his wilderness fantasy.

Neddy swims the Halloran's **pool**, after which Mrs. Halloran tries to express condolences for Neddy's "misfortunes." Neddy denies any misfortune, and in response Mrs. Halloran prods him about losing his house and trails off while mentioning his daughters. Neddy issues another denial and Mrs. Halloran falls quiet.

Mrs. Halloran sympathizes with Neddy in distinctly cliched suburban language, noting that she's "terribly" sorry in a way that sounds insincere. But the outreach reveals a troubling detail that neither the reader nor Neddy is prepared for: Neddy has lost his house. It's a suggestion that he flatly denies, but Neddy's previous mention of his gift for repressing unpleasant memories suggests that Mrs. Halloran is close to the truth.

As Neddy leaves the Hallorans' **pool**, he feels depressed and weak. The swim is starting to exhaust him, but he claims there's no way he could have known it would when starting out, as he woke up feeling so strong and virile. Leaves are falling and the cold in the air enters his bones. Neddy is confused to smell woodsmoke on the air, since it's supposed to be summer.

Even the Halloran's "natural" pool hasn't helped Neddy recover his strength and determination. The scent of woodsmoke implies that the seasons have turned even further, approaching winter. Mirroring the season, Neddy feels tired and begins to regret his swimming quest. The way Neddy refers to this morning as if it were long ago emphasizes how much time seems to have passed for Neddy.

Neddy decides he needs **a drink** to restore his strength and also to restore his original vision of his quest to swim across the country. He compares himself to a "channel swimmer" who would drink brandy to give himself strength for the crossing.

Here, Neddy tries to return to his former self-image as an explorer or trailblazing athlete. A "channel swimmer" calls to mind a previous era of masculine achievement when swimmers would pit themselves against nature. But what Neddy needs to achieve that image is a convenience of civilization: whiskey. Neddy's delusion is such that he thinks all it would take to return to his youthful state is a drink.

Neddy looks in on the Hallorans' daughter Helen and her husband Eric and notes that their **pool** is "small." He asks them for a **drink**, but Helen tells him that they don't keep alcohol in the house since Eric's operation three years ago. Neddy's is bewildered to have forgotten that Eric was sick, and he questions whether his repression of unpleasantness had caused him to forget losing his house and putting his children in jeopardy as well.

Helen's small, confining pool symbolizes how meager and unpleasant Neddy's ambitions now seem. His effort to get back on track with a drink is further frustrated when Helen mentions Eric's operation. Since it happened three years ago, Neddy surely should have know about that already, but he's shocked all the same. The repressed memory further chips away at his delusion, and Neddy's denial about his family leaving almost falls away.

After this reminder of Eric's operation, Neddy examines in vivid detail Eric's surgery scars. He's unsettled by the disappearance of Eric's navel, noting that it had severed his "link to birth."

Eric's operation seems to Neddy an unnatural intrusion into the natural process of birth. The operation removed his navel, or belly button, and with it the reminder of the umbilical cord that once attached him to his mother. This disturbs Neddy because of his investment in fantasies about a connection to primal human nature. The scars also represent the bodily markers of age and a reminder of human frailty. As Neddy still believes himself a young man, he turns away from Eric because of what it might say about himself.

Helen points Neddy towards the Biswangers for a **drink**, as they're having a party. Neddy reluctantly decides to "get wet," swimming Helen's **pool**. On his way to the Biswangers, he claims that he and Lucinda want "terribly" to have Helen over again and promises to plan something "very soon."

Neddy says to Helen that he will "get wet," which seems like an admission that his romantic return home has been completely shorn of any illusions. What was once a heroic swim along a river is now just an obligation to get in the pool so he can say he did. Leaving their house, Neddy repays Helen's kindness with the same sort of insincere invitation that Mrs. Graham and Mrs. Bunker used. The emphasis in his speech shows that the words aren't believable on their own. He has to insist this is the truth, even though everyone knows it's a throwaway gesture.

Neddy describes his history with the Biswangers, whom he describes as boring, unpleasant people who talk endlessly about the "price of things." Mrs. Biswanger routinely invited Neddy and Lucinda to dinner, but they always refused even though they were given plenty of notice. Neddy notes that the Biswangers were "unwilling to comprehend the rigid and undemocratic realities of their society."

The Biswangers are people who haven't learned (whether out of ignorance or stubbornness) the subtle signaling involved in suburban life. Neddy and Lucinda had rejected Mrs. Biswanger's careful invitation as a way of barring her from their social circle without any actual insult or confrontation. The mention of "undemocratic realities" highlights a basic cruelty and inequality of this social environment. Additionally, discussion of the "price of things" seems boring to Neddy, but it may also activate Neddy's repressed memories of losing his house. The discussion of money triggers a deep-seated anxiety.

Neddy approaches the house, expecting to be welcomed, but Mrs. Biswanger is clearly hurt and insulted by his presence. She calls him a "gate crasher" and allows him in, but she's unhappy about it. Neddy is unfazed by her rudeness because he's convinced that she "could not deal him a social blow."

Neddy's naivete on his approach to the Biswangers' house is total. Despite the severe insult he dealt to her by refusing her invitations, Neddy still expects to be welcomed. It's a clear sign that the pain of others isn't intelligible to Neddy because his repression is so complete. Neddy is also insulated from Mrs. Biswanger's insults by a sense of social superiority, believing she's not respected enough for her insults to carry social weight.

As Neddy enters the party, he hears others talk behind his back, describing a Sunday when he showed up drunk and begged for money. Neddy gets **a drink**, but the bartender is rude to him, as he senses that Neddy has been ostracized.

The gossip around the party creates a fuller picture of Neddy's downfall. His discomfort with "the price of things" becomes clearer as the guests around him tell stories about him showing up drunk and begging for money. His financial problems are undoubtedly a deep source of shame and pain for Neddy, a prime target for his repression. His description as "drunk" also puts his drinking in perspective. What seemed before a harmless supplement to his swim now seems like an addiction born of the need to escape.

Neddy moves on to his third-to-last **pool**, which belongs to his old mistress Shirley Adams. He's momentarily excited by the prospect of "love—sexual roughhouse in fact," and he goes on to compare sexual pleasure to an "elixir," "pain killer," and a "brightly colored pill."

The casualness with which Neddy thinks of his mistress provides more context for the collapse of his marriage. Neddy haughtily thinks of an affair as something due to him, just another harmless whim, rather than a reason for his family's departure. Neddy's shift from the word "love" to "sexual roughhouse" further illustrates his emotional immaturity. He thinks of Shirley not as a real person, but as an object, one of several that can provide a momentary relief from pain.

Previously, Neddy had broken it off with Shirley and she seemed crushed, while Neddy had thought it was just a lighthearted fling. He observed that she had "wept." When Neddy approaches her, Shirley is confused and hurt, and he worries that she will "weep" again.

Neddy's studious avoidance of emotional life makes him unable to process or even notice pain in others. The tension between Neddy's blitheness and Shirley's sorrow shows that they had not been approaching the relationship with the same expectations. Neddy had thought of Shirley as a disposable pleasure, another "painkiller," while she might have truly loved him.

Shirley tells Neddy to "grow up" when he talks about his quest to swim across the county. He swims her **pool**, but he feels so weak and tired that he uses the ladder to jump out at the end, which he prided himself on never doing. Looking out at Shirley's bathhouse, he sees a young man.

When Neddy describes his quest to swim across the country, it sounds ridiculous, even childish. Shirley pushes back in a way that shows the depths of Neddy's delusion and immaturity, telling him to "grow up." The appearance of the young man in the bathhouse puts this delusion into greater relief. The young man appears to Neddy as if to highlight Neddy's identity as an old man.

Leaving Shirley's backyard, Neddy feels miserable. He looks up at the summer night sky only to see winter constellations and he starts crying in confusion. It occurs to him that "He had swum too long, he had been immersed too long."

Looking for summer constellations and finding winter ones, Neddy is nearly broken by the asymmetry between his delusions and reality. The approaching winter of age has replaced the summer of youth, but Neddy is so disassociated that he just weeps. The metaphor of "immersion" speaks to the fact that he lives inside a delusion. Neddy's admission that "he had swum too long" seems to say that he had been distracted by pleasant fantasy while his life was falling apart.

Faced with the next **pool**, Neddy is so weak that he has to gingerly descend the steps instead of diving in "for the first time in his life." At the Gilmartins' pool, Neddy reaches the end of his vigor and athletic ability. The youthful feeling of this morning is now so distant that it passes out of his memory. He "swam a hobbled sidestroke that he might have learned as a youth."

The final pools complete Neddy's transformation into an old man. Neddy is now the man he once mocked: someone too weak to dive into the pool. He is also too weak to abide by social convention, as he abandons the crawl as his stroke of choice, preferring an easier one. The virility of the man who slapped the bust of Aphrodite in the morning is gone, which shows the painful absurdity of an old man completing a young man's challenge.

Neddy stops periodically by the curb of the **pool** to rest, and when he reaches the end, he uses the ladder to get out instead of leaping up from the edge. Afterward, he feels exhausted rather than vindicated with only a "vague" sense of triumph. He turns up the driveway to his house "stooped, holding on to the gateposts for support."

Neddy has completed a significant physical challenge, which should provide him with a feeling of achievement, but instead he's old and broken. The fact that the triumph is "vague" just shows that Neddy now barely understands what he wanted out of his quest when he set out that morning. His total exhaustion seems to say that there's no valor in completing a foolish vow out of stubbornness or emotional avoidance.

Reaching his house, Neddy sees that it's dark. He speculates about whether Lucinda and the girls are still at the neighbor's. The garage doors are locked and covered with rust, and the gutters have been mangled by the storm. Neddy thinks his maid or cook has mistakenly locked the doors, but then he remembers that he had been forced to let them both go a while ago. Shouting and pounding on the doors, Neddy looks in the house and sees that it's completely empty.

Neddy keeps deluding himself until the very last sentence of the story. He frantically searches for alternate explanations for his empty house, anything to avoid confronting his own immaturity, infidelity, and shortsightedness. The realization that he hadn't been able to employ a maid or cook for a while confirms what the gossip at the Biswangers' hinted at: Neddy's financial collapse. But Cheever suggests that Neddy's financial ruin was preceded by years of emotional unavailability and selfishness. His return home by water stands in for these long years where he sought momentary pleasure—and "swam" in the alcohol he was always drinking—instead of permanent love and happiness.

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