

Changing: A Short Study on John Cheever's "Swimmer"

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Abstract

American writer John Cheever's "Swimmer" adopts a surreal or symbolic style that breaks away from the previous ideas and approaches of realism. The story's hero Neddy Merrill embarks on an adventurous journey to swim home: an eight-mile journey that connects suburban swimming pools in his mind's eye to form the magnificent Lucinda River, named for his wife. This paper examines the ever-changing natural scenes to explore the role of such scenes in portraying the characters and revealing the theme of the story. It also discusses the changing fates of the hero in two aspects-people's changing attitudes towards Neddy and his own changing physical condition. The study considers the hero's tragedy as a true portrayal of the loss and spiritual plight of the American middle class, which strengthens the sense of crisis and disillusionment in modern society, and expresses the author's deep doubts about the lifestyle and thinking mode of the middle class, and his infinite worries about the future of the American middle class.

Keywords

John Cheever; "Swimmer;" Changing.

1. Introduction

As the representative of the works of John Cheever (1912-1982) in the later stages of his creative life, "The Swimmer" (1964) is written in a surreal or symbolic style that breaks away from the previous ideas and approaches of realism. Cheever's unique life experiences contributed to this style-he was once expelled from college; later, he taught English writing in prison. Readers can feel his emotions and get a glimpse of the state of American society at the time. "Through life's trivialities and family conflicts, John Cheever reveals a fundamental problem of American middle-class society: material affluence and spiritual poverty and emptiness" (Wu, 2016, p. 20).

A detailed and profound description of the American middle class is given in "The Swimmer", "which realistically shows many aspects of contemporary American social life, profoundly exposes the real contradictions and confusions, and portrays Neddy Merrill, a representative figure of the middle class in the real contradictions, as a terrified and defeated person" (Chen & Liu, 2003, p. 90). Neddy embarks on an adventurous journey to swim home: an eight-mile journey that connects suburban swimming pools in his mind's eye to form the magnificent Lucinda River, named for his wife. The storyline is dominated by this journey and what happens to the protagonist, including the changing factors concerning the natural scenes and the fates of the hero.

Many scholars have discussed symbolism and metaphorical devices adopted in the story. This paper will examine the ever-changing natural scenes to explore the role of such scenes in portraying the characters and revealing the theme of the story. It will also discuss the changing fates of the hero in two aspects-people's changing attitude towards Neddy and his own physical condition.

2. The Changing Natural Scenes

The beginning part of the story introduces the swimming trip as taking place on a hot summer day. Midsummer represents blazing sun and enthusiasm, corresponding to the strength of the American middle class. At the same time, Neddy is in the most robust period of his life. In middle age, Neddy has money and fame, he is popular and indulges in parties. However, the beautiful weather changes at the beginning of the novel. Cumulus clouds appear in the sky, and this suggests that the wonderful life of the middle class is about to face a crisis. These cumulus clouds are nothing more than the hero's happy visions of himself and his world. In the meantime, this description gives a pleasant atmosphere. "Then, as the main character Neddy's problems grow and pile up, a storm is coming, the city of cumulus clouds becomes dark, and Neddy seems to know about the disaster that is going to destroy his whole world" (p. 91).

Halfway through the journey there is a sudden change in the weather. The storm is truly coming, the thunderstorm washes over everything on the ground, although Neddy takes shelter from the storm on Mrs. Levy's balcony, his body involuntarily trembles. Neddy's physical senses hint that circumstances have changed and the leisurely days of the middle class no longer exist. The storm symbolizes the dramatic change in Neddy's life: from the peak of a robust, happy, rich, leisurely, and popular life to the nadir of a weak, miserable, poor, and ridiculed and rejected life (Zhang & Li, 2011). In addition to this, the scene after the storm is also full of deep meaning. The red and yellow leaves represent the scattered gold coins, which symbolize money and affluence, while the relentless gale symbolizes Neddy's merciless fate of bankruptcy in the capitalist society, and the blown-off leaves reveal Neddy's declining social status and deteriorating living conditions.

As the journey is approaching to its end, Neddy's strength gradually fails to sustain him for the rest of the journey, and he feels a piercing cold. Pay attention to the description: The leaves fall around Neddy, and he smells the smoke of burning trees. This scene contains a lot of information, on the one hand, it implies the change of time, Neddy starts from the height of summer, but in the last part of the journey the season is no longer a warm and energetic summer, but a dull and despondent fall; on the other hand, the fading of the leaves once again confirms Neddy's bankruptcy and miserable fate. When the money disperses, without the support of wealth and fame, there is no doubt that Neddy is abandoned by the people.

Neddy finally reaches the end of the line, he walks with his exhausted body towards his house, but the only thing waiting for him is a rusty doorknob and an empty house that will never be opened again. What he has pursued and striven for is nothing but a fantasy and nothingness (Su, 2015). As Peng Rui (2017, p. 94) said, "Cheever offers no explanation for this tragic ending, but it is implicit that the protagonist's action of swimming home is an escape from the stresses and worries of real life". The emptiness of the house reveals his homelessness and symbolizes the shattering of Neddy's illusions. Reality has become too much for Neddy and he chooses to fantasize, burying his inner grief deep inside and repeating the routine of his once familiar life day after day. It is worth pondering whether Neddy realizes the changes in real life. Take the following extract as instance:

In the distance he heard **thunder** {1}. It would storm. The stand of cumulus cloud-that city-had risen and darkened, and while he sat there he heard the percussiveness of **thunder** again {2}. but when there was another peal of **thunder** he took off for home {3}. the pin-headed birds seem to organize their song into some acute and knowledgeable recognition of the storm's approach {4}. **Why** did he love storms, what was the meaning of his excitement ... **why** had the simple task ... **why** did the first watery notes of a storm wind ... {5}. Since it was midsummer the tree must be blighted, and yet he felt a peculiar sadness at this sign of autumn {6}. (Nangong & Wei, 2015, pp. 175-176).

To make the analysis clearer, this paper adopts a set of graphic marking ways: The important words are in bold and italic; some key nouns are underlined and italic; other important nouns are underlined.

The three occurrences of thunder can be seen as a wake-up call to Neddy, who actually senses that certain changes are taking place, but he is afraid to face the reality, and he tries to escape from the reality of his life. He pretends that he doesn't see it and refuses to face up to his failures, but instead tries to cover them up and suppress them. Cumulus clouds, the storm and the song of the birds signal an impending crisis, and the repetition of the word "why" shows Neddy's unusual feelings, expressed in terms of excitement and inexplicable sadness, which may be interpreted as a state of self-delusion. This is similar to the characters in John Cheever's suburban novels. "Contrary to what they would like to believe, their lives are fraught with problems. The dream of recreating the world into an Eden is a delusion the characters use to avoid the reality that exists around them everyday" (Dyer, 1996, p. 3).

This story vividly reveals the character of the American middle class, who are always worried about failing on the inside, despite their outward glamor. This class, represented by Neddy, is happy to hold parties, and they use alcohol to maintain friendly relationships among human beings. "Even though they tried their best to cling to the social circle by gathering in suburbs, consuming symbol commodities, keeping social bonds with others, their status was fragile" (Bai, 2020, p. 68).

In fact, Neddy is swimming in water and money. "In Cheever's text, the implied metaphor "swimming in money" transfers qualities of water to money, suggesting that money supports the swimmer, buoys up and sustains the swimmer, as he or she swims" (Ullrich, 2020, p. 2). After Neddy's bankruptcy, the quality of the water in the pool and the treatment he receives when he goes for a swim are diametrically opposed to what they were before, reflecting the harsh truth of America's troubled society and the lack of human kindness in capitalist society.

According to Campbell Donna (2011, p. 499), "Set frequently in urban slums or a savage wilderness, naturalistic stories forced readers to confront the indifference of nature, and, closer to home, the indifference of human beings toward their fellow creatures".

"The Swimmer" is different from traditional naturalistic literature, which is rich in the meaning of nature. The constantly changing natural scenes in the story are hints to the changing fates of the hero, which will be discussed in the next section.

3. The Changing Fates of the Hero

At the beginning of his swimming journey, Neddy Merrill is welcomed by his owners everywhere he goes. But after a storm, everything changes and people are disgusted with him. When he return home exhausted from his long journey, he finds the house empty and dark, with his wife and daughter missing.

As people's attitudes toward Neddy goes from good to bad, so does his health. In the beginning, Neddy gives the impression that he is full of youthful vigor, fantasy and vitality. However, during the long journey, the tone of the story gradually changes. With the passage of time and the change of weather, the move of long journey seems childish and unrealistic, and Neddy feels more and more powerless, weak and depressed.

In order to understand Neddy's situation more clearly, this section will discuss two aspects: people's changing attitude towards Neddy and his own physical condition. To make the analysis clearer, the paper adopt several graphic ways to mark some items more visually: the key nouns are underlined, some important verbs are in bold, some adjectives are in box, and other important items are in italic.

The first part is about the change of people's attitude towards Neddy.

She raised her head and from across the road, the lawns, the gardens, the woods, the fields, he heard again the brilliant noise of voices over water (1). He crossed some fields to the Biswangers' and the sounds of revelry there (2). They *would be honored* to give him a drink, they *would be happy* to give him a drink (3). The Biswangers **invited** him and Lucinda for dinner *four times a year, six weeks in advance* (4). They were always *rebuffed and yet they continued to **send out** their invitations* (5). When Grace Biswanger saw him she came toward him, *not affectionately as he had every right to expect*, but bellicosely (6). "Why, this party has everything," she said loudly, "including a gate crasher (7). (Nangong & Wei, 2015, pp. 179-181).

Sentence (1) describes the sound of the revelry at the Biswangers' party, which reaches Neddy's ears from across the road, the lawn, the garden, the woods, the fields, and over the water, revealing the lively atmosphere of the party. Sentence (2) states that Neddy passes through some fields and arrived at Biswangers' home. Sentence (3) appears twice as 'would be... to give him a drink', which describes what the Neddy expects to happen. He expects Biswangers to invite him to a drink. Sentence (4) describes how Biswangers invited Neddy to dinner earlier. Sentence (5) states that Biswangers would constantly invite Neddy before, so Neddy believes that this time Biswangers would also warmly invite him to drink, just like before. Sentence (6) has a turning point, and when Biswangers see Neddy, he does not show much friendliness, but rather is very provocative. In sentence (7), Biswangers loudly say that Neddy is an unwelcome guest, indicating that people's attitudes towards Neddy have changed at that time. The first half of the story shows a middle-class male protagonist who lives a happy and fulfilling life. He receives an exaggerated and almost unreal warm reception from his neighbors, but in the second half, people are very rude to him, full of hypocrisy and indifference. These two attitudes are in stark contrast.

The second part is about Neddy's own physical condition.

He **took off** a sweater that was hung over his shoulders and **dove in** (1). He had an inexplicable contempt for men who did not hurl themselves into pools (2). He **dove into** the Sachs's cold water and, **gasping**, close to **drowning**, made his way from one end of the pool to the other (3). He **dove in** and **swam** the pool, but when he tried to **haul** himself up onto the curb he found that *the strength in his arms and shoulders had gone* (4a), and he **paddled** to the ladder and **climbed out** (4b). He **staggered** with fatigue on his way to the Clydes' and **paddled** the length of their pool, **stopping** again and again with his hand on the curb to rest (5). (Nangong & Wei, 2015, pp. 174, 179, 181).

According to sentences (1) and (2), it can be inferred that before a storm, Neddy enjoys a fierce dive into the water, demonstrating his exceptional swimming skills, and has an indescribable sense of disdain towards those who can not jump into the water suddenly. Before departure, Neddy is strong and energetic, and swimming is a natural state for him. As the journey goes on, Neddy gradually become exhausted and his old state is evident. Sentence (3) mentions that Neddy has started to pant in the swimming pool and is almost suffocating. 4a mentions that Neddy finds that his arms and shoulders have lost strength and he can only walk on water instead of swimming over. 4b mentions that Neddy needs to rely on the ladder to get ashore. Sentence (5) states that Neddy has already been exhausted when he goes to Clyde's house. He also paddles in Clyde's swimming pool and occasionally stops to rest on the railing. A series of detailed depictions of Neddy's movements and swimming style show that the protagonist Neddy has set ambitious goals that have exceeded his physical load. Neddy has a lot of energy at the start of the trip, but after a storm, everything goes downhill and he becomes exhausted. At the same time, Neddy's swimming movements and style at the beginning of the journey also contrast sharply with his final state, reflecting his desolation in the end.

The change of people's attitudes towards Neddy and the change of Neddy's own physical condition are two timelines that occur simultaneously in the story. Nearly all the so-called

friends appear in Neddy's homeward swimming journey though it costs him less than half a day. And the owners of the fifteen pools responded variously (Bai, 2018, pp. 80-85). Before the storm, Neddy is middle-class American. He is strong, and people were warm to him. After the storm, Neddy's rich life changed dramatically. He loses his job, goes bankrupt, and even loses his family. He has nothing. He has exhausted his strength in the swimming trip, and people hate him. The friends of the characters in the story depend on their social status, which is a false friendship (David, 2022, pp. 226-232). At first, the enthusiasm for Neddy is superficial; in fact, it hid hypocrisy. Later, as Neddy's financial status changes, when he needs comfort and tries to ask a friend for a drink, he is mercilessly mocked and coldly refused at the Biswangers' house. When he loses his money and status, the original cordial greetings and invitations between friends became distant and cold (Cao, 2022, p. 26).

4. Conclusion

Neddy's swimming journey is like the process of human's exploration of nature. In the beginning, everything is perfect and the society has developed and progressed while the explorers have been admired. However, after the uncontrolled exploration and conquest of nature, the natural environment has deteriorated drastically, and the ecological environment has been seriously damaged and gradually threatened the living environment of human beings. With the worsened situation, the hero loses both the others' positive attitudes towards him and his own health and strength. If people do not reconsider the relationship between human beings and nature, and do not make changes, they will end up like Neddy, with nothing left but hold on to an empty house regretfully. "The Swimmer" is filled with a bleak and desolate atmosphere. During Neddy's journey back home, such sad atmosphere is more and more intense along the way with him to disillusionment and despair. This tragedy is a true portrayal of the loss and spiritual plight of the American middle class, which strengthens the sense of crisis and disillusionment in modern society, and expresses the author's deep doubts about the lifestyle and thinking mode of the middle class, and his infinite worries about the future of the American middle class.

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