

THE ARCHETYPAL SIGNIFICANCE OF  
JOHN CHEEVER'S "THE SWIMMER"

by

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to the late Lawrence D. Stewart, PhD, who introduced me to the beauty and value of great literature as an undergraduate student.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	vii
ABSTRACT.....	viii
CHAPTER	
I.    INTRODUCTION .....	1
II.   THE GENESIS OF “THE SWIMMER” .....	21
III.  “THE SWIMMER” AS FRYE’S TRAGIC MYTHOS OF AUTUMN.....	27
IV.   NED MERRILL AS TRAGIC HERO .....	48
V.    THE ARCHETYPAL IMAGERY OF “THE SWIMMER”.....	61
VI.   NED MERRILL AS JUNG’S <i>PUER AETERNUS</i> .....	78
VII.  CONCLUSION.....	87
WORKS CITED .....	90

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Description
BGW	<i>The Brigadier and the Golf Widow</i>
MS	Literary Manuscript of “The Swimmer”

## ABSTRACT

This thesis presents a new interpretation of “The Swimmer,” a short story by John Cheever, by applying formal principles of archetypal literary criticism to analyze the story. This archetypal analysis is supplemented by relevant material from Cheever’s journals and manuscript archives. Grounded in Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious as a repository of inherited archetypes, archetypal literary criticism, as interpreted by Northrop Frye, is particularly well-suited to Cheever’s fiction because it correlates with Cheever’s own theories of artistic creation. Chapter One explains the critical approach of archetypal literary criticism, including a discussion of its relevance to Cheever’s fiction, and summarizes existing scholarship interpreting “The Swimmer.” Chapter Two discusses the story’s genesis and includes a discussion of Cheever’s theories of short fiction. Chapter Three analyzes “The Swimmer” as an example of Frye’s mythos of autumn, or tragedy. Chapter Three analyzes the story’s main character, Ned Merrill, as an example of the tragic hero using Frye’s theories and also examines the influence of Homer’s *Odyssey*, observing parallels between the characters of Odysseus and Ned Merrill and suggesting the *Odyssey* as a possible source of the story’s title. Chapter Five analyzes the story’s archetypal imagery, including color and number symbolism, which expresses the story’s tragic mythos of autumn. Chapter Six explores the tragic character of Ned Merrill as an example of Jung’s archetype of the *puer aeternus*, the eternal child. Chapter Seven summarizes these various strands of interpretation and analysis to conclude the thesis.



## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

“And I think of . . . the forever boy on the forever summers afternoon.  
The youthful, the summery smile collapses on a look of pain.”

John Cheever, *Journals* 11.1.17

In a 1966 interview in *Life* magazine, John Cheever’s friend and literary colleague, John Updike remarked: “I’ve never met anyone quicker on his feet, both fictional and real, than Cheever” (Plath 17). Updike’s comment came two years after the publication of Cheever’s short story “The Swimmer,” which Updike considered to be among Cheever’s “last superb stories” (Bosha, *Critical Response* 221). This narrative of a middle-aged man who ages in the course of a single summer afternoon epitomizes the literary agility observed by Updike. Cheever himself once referred to the story as “a sleight-of-hand” (Donaldson, *Conversations* 64). Although “The Swimmer” has received considerable critical attention from scholars, this existing scholarship has not to date employed formal archetypal criticism in interpreting the story. This thesis will fill that gap in scholarship to present a new interpretation of the story. In addition, where relevant to this interpretation, this thesis will incorporate Cheever’s journals compiled during the time period of the story’s composition and Cheever’s changes to the literary manuscript of “The Swimmer” prior to the story’s publication.

This Introduction explains the critical approach of archetypal literary criticism, including a discussion of its relevance to Cheever’s fiction, and summarizes existing scholarship interpreting “The Swimmer.” Chapter Two discusses the story’s genesis, including a discussion of Cheever’s theories of short fiction. Chapter Three analyzes “The Swimmer” as an example of Northrop Frye’s mythos of autumn or tragedy.

Chapter Four analyzes the story's main character, Ned Merrill, as an example of the tragic hero using Frye's theories and also examines the influence of Homer's *Odyssey*, including the parallels between Odysseus and Cheever's character Ned Merrill. This chapter also considers the *Odyssey* as a possible source of the story's title. Chapter Five analyzes the story's archetypal imagery, including color and number symbolism, which expresses the story's tragic mythos of autumn. Chapter Six explores the tragic character of Ned Merrill as an example of Jung's archetype of the *puer aeternus*, the eternal child. The Conclusion summarizes these various strands of interpretation and analysis.

Archetypal literary criticism is grounded in Carl Jung's concept of the collective unconscious. Jung theorized that in addition to our immediate consciousness, "there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals" (Jung, *Archetypes* 43). Jung coined the term "collective unconscious" for this second psychic system, which he contended is inherited and "consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic elements" (Jung, *Archetypes* 43). According to Jung, the contents of an archetypal character are manifestations of processes in the collective unconscious, which are first and foremost expressed as metaphors (Jung, *Archetypes* 156).

Jung identified two modes of artistic creation, psychological and visionary (Jung, *Modern Man* 155). According to Jung, the psychological mode "deals with materials drawn from the realm of human consciousness—for instance, with the lessons of life, with emotional shocks, the experience of passion and the crises of human destiny in general—all of which go to make up the conscious life of man, and his feeling life in

particular” (Jung, *Modern Man* 155). With the psychological mode, “[t]he poet’s work is an interpretation and illumination of the contents of consciousness, of the ineluctable experiences of human life with its eternally recurrent sorrow and joy” (Jung, *Modern Man* 155-56).

The visionary mode of artistic creation is profoundly different because it draws its source from the collective unconscious:

The experience that furnishes the material for artistic expression is no longer familiar. It is a strange something that derives its existence from the hinterland of man’s mind—that suggests the abyss of time separating us from the pre-human ages, or evokes a super-human world of contrasting light and darkness. It is a primordial experience which surpasses man’s understanding, and to which he is therefore in danger of succumbing. The value and the force of the experience are given by its enormity. It arises from timeless depths; it is foreign and cold, many-sided, demonic and grotesque. (Jung, *Modern Man* 156-57)

Cheever’s own aesthetic theories suggest that his literary works may be examples of visionary artistic creation arising from the collective unconscious. In a 1976 interview, Cheever described the creative process in a way that has similarities to Jung’s perspective:

Cocteau said that writing is a force of memory that is not understood. I agree with this. Raymond Chandler described it as a direct line to the subconscious. The books that you really love give the sense, when you first open them, of having been there. It is a creation, almost like a

chamber in the memory. Places that one has never been to, things that one has never seen or heard, but their fitness is so sound that you've been there somehow. (Donaldson, *Conversations* 108)

This theory is closely tied to Cheever's views of the proper role of autobiography in fiction. According to Cheever, "the role that autobiography plays in fiction is precisely the role that reality plays in a dream":

As you dream your ship, you perhaps know the boat, but you're going towards a coast that is quite strange; you're wearing strange clothes, the language that is being spoken around you is a language you don't understand, but the woman on your left is your wife. It seems to me that this not capricious but quite mysterious union of fact and imagination that one also finds in fiction. (Donaldson, *Conversations* 155)

In an unsigned eulogy in the *New Yorker* shortly after Cheever's death, John Updike eloquently captured the archetypal nature of Cheever's fiction, specifically alluding to "The Swimmer":

He was often labeled a writer about suburbia; but many people have written about suburbia, and only Cheever was able to make an archetypal place out of it, a terrain we can recognize within ourselves, wherever we are, or have been. Only he saw in its cocktail parties and swimming pools the shimmer of dissolving dreams. . . ." (Updike, *New Yorker* 27).

Archetypes may be generally grouped into three categories: images, archetypal motifs or patterns, and archetypes as genres or types of literature (Guerin 227-31).

Archetypal images include water, the sun, colors, shapes such as the circle, numbers,

archetypal figures such as the archetypal woman, the wise old man, and the trickster, and landscape images such as the garden, tree, desert, and mountain (Guerin 227-30).

Archetypal motifs or patterns include the creation, immortality, and hero or heroine archetypes of transformation and redemption (Guerin 230-31). Archetypal genres correspond to the four seasons: the mythos of spring or comedy, the mythos of summer or romance, the mythos of fall or tragedy, and the mythos of winter or irony (Guerin 231). These archetypal genres are most closely associated with Frye, who is considered the foremost archetypal critic of the twentieth century (Bressler 132).

Frye incorporated many of Jung's ideas to create a formal approach to literary study and interpretation called archetypal or mythic literary criticism (Bressler 132).

Archetypal criticism considers texts in the context of their overall structure or mythic development to explain both their structure and significance (Bressler 132). Archetypal critics view myth as the most elemental form and structure in literature because it possesses the deepest imagery and most abstract meaning of any kind of literature (Bressler 133). Myth is also the most profoundly allegorical and most directly related through symbols (Bressler 133).

Frye asserted that all of literature comprises one complete and whole story called the monomyth comprised of comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony:

The four *mythoi* that we are dealing with, comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony, may now be seen as four aspects of a central unifying myth. *Agon* or conflict is the basis or archetypal theme of romance, the radical of romance being a sequence of marvelous adventures. *Pathos* or catastrophe, whether in triumph or in defeat, is the archetypal theme of

tragedy. *Sparagmos*, or the sense that heroism and effective action are absent, disorganized or forever doomed to defeat, and that confusion and anarchy reign over the world, is the archetypal theme of irony and satire. *Anagnorisis*, or recognition of a newborn society rising in triumph around a still somewhat mysterious hero and his bride, is the archetypal theme of comedy. (Frye, *Anatomy* 192)

Frye's theory of the monomyth is often diagrammed as a circle containing the four separate phases of comedy, tragedy, romance, and irony, with each phase corresponding to a season of the year and to peculiar cycles of human experience:

The romance phase, located at the top of the circle, is our summer story. In this story, all our wishes are fulfilled, and we can achieve total happiness. At the bottom of the circle is winter, or the antiromance phase. The opposite of summer, this phase tells the story of bondage, imprisonment, frustration, and fear. Midway between romance and antiromance and to the right of the middle of the circle is the spring phase, or comedy. This phase relates the story of our rise from antiromance and frustration to freedom and happiness. Correspondingly, across the circle is tragedy, or the fall phase, narrating our fall from the romance phase and from happiness and freedom to disaster. (Bressler 133)

Frye's theory of the monomyth recalls similar observations by Jung that the processes of nature, including the four seasons, are symbolic expressions of the unconscious:

All the mythologized processes of nature, such as summer and winter, the phases of the moon, the rainy seasons, and so forth, are in no sense allegories of these objective occurrences; rather they are symbolic expressions of the inner, unconscious drama of the psyche which becomes accessible to man's consciousness by way of projection—that is, mirrored in the events of nature. (Jung, *Mythology* 71)

According to Frye, fictional modes may be classified by the hero's power of action, which may be greater or lesser than, or roughly the same as, the reader's (Frye, *Anatomy* 33). The hero of myth is a divine being who is superior in kind both to other men and to the environment of other men (Frye, *Anatomy* 33). The typical hero of romance is superior in degree to other men and to his environment and "moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended" (Frye, *Anatomy* 33). The hero of the high mimetic mode is superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment (Frye, *Anatomy* 33-4). He is a leader whose authority, passions, and powers of expression exceed ordinary men but remain subject to social criticism and to the order of nature (Frye, *Anatomy* 34). The hero of the low mimetic mode is superior neither to other men nor to his environment and is characterized by his common humanity (Frye, *Anatomy* 34). The ironic hero is inferior in power and intelligence, qualities which give the reader "the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity" (Frye, *Anatomy* 34).

Frye contended that tragedy consists of five separate modes: Dionysiac, elegiac, high mimetic, low mimetic, and ironic. The Dionysiac mode deals with stories of dying gods (Frye, *Anatomy* 36). The elegiac mode "presents a heroism unspoiled by irony"

(Frye, *Anatomy* 36). The elegiac is characterized by a “diffused, resigned, melancholy sense of the passage of time, of the old order changing and yielding to a new one,” such as the dying Beowulf and Tennyson’s *Passing of Arthur* (Frye, *Anatomy* 36-7). The central or high mimetic mode, “balanced midway between godlike heroism and all-too-human irony, is expressed in the traditional conception of catharsis,” involving pity and fear (Frye, *Anatomy* 37). The role of pity and fear of tragedy is distinct from their roles in romance, which turn fear into adventure, the marvelous, or pensive melancholy, and pity into charm and creative fantasy (Frye, *Anatomy* 37). In high mimetic tragedy, pity and fear “become respectively, favorable and adverse moral judgment, which are relevant to tragedy but not central to it” (Frye, *Anatomy* 38).

In low mimetic tragedy, “pity and fear are neither purged nor absorbed into pleasures, but are communicated externally, as sensations” (Frye, *Anatomy* 38). Low mimetic tragedy is best-described by the word “pathos,” which “presents its hero as isolated by a weakness which appeals to our sympathy because it is on our own level of experience” (Frye, *Anatomy* 38):

The root idea of pathos is the exclusion of an individual on our own level from a social group to which he is trying to belong. Hence the central tradition of sophisticated pathos is the study of the isolated mind, the story of how someone recognizably like ourselves is broken by a conflict between the inner and outer world, between imaginative reality and the sort of reality which is established by social consensus. Such tragedy may be concerned . . . with a mania or obsession about rising in the world, this being the central low mimetic counterpart of the fiction of the fall of a



leader. Or it may deal with the conflict of inner and outer life . . . or with the impact of inflexible morality on experience. The type of character involved here we may call by the Greek word *alazon*, which means impostor, someone who pretends or tries to be something more than he is. (Frye, *Anatomy* 39)

The ironic mode “is born from the low mimetic” in that “it takes life exactly as it finds it” (Frye, *Anatomy* 41). Frye contended that “[t]he term irony . . . indicates a technique of appearing to be less than one is, which in literature becomes most commonly a technique of saying as little and meaning as much as possible, or, in a more general way, a pattern of words that turns away from direct statement or its own obvious meaning” (Frye, *Anatomy* 40). The ironic fiction-writer exhibits *eiron* or self-deprecation and “pretends to know nothing, even that he is ironic” (Frye, *Anatomy* 40). The ironic mode requires “[c]omplete objectivity and suppression of all moral judgments . . .” (Frye, *Anatomy* 40). Pierre Vitoux has observed that the ironic mode is largely defined by narrative perspective and discourse rather than the attributes of its hero (388-89).

Frye likewise defined six phases of tragedy which move from the heroic to the ironic, the first three corresponding to the first phases of romance, the last three of irony (Frye, *Anatomy* 219). The first phase of tragedy is one in which the central character “is given the greatest possible dignity in contrast to the other characters, so that we get the perspective of a stag pulled down by wolves” (Frye, *Anatomy* 219). The central character’s dignity arises from courage and innocence (Frye, *Anatomy* 219). The second phase is “the tragedy of innocence in the sense of inexperience, usually involving young

people” (Frye, *Anatomy* 220). The third phase is tragedy which emphasizes the “success of completion of the hero’s achievement” (Frye, *Anatomy* 220).

The fourth phase of tragedy “is the typical fall of the hero through hybris and hamartia,” crossing the boundary from innocence to experience (Frye, *Anatomy* 221). The fifth phase is characterized by an increasing irony and decreasing heroism in which the characters “look further away and in a smaller perspective” (Frye, *Anatomy* 221). The tragic action of the fifth phase is “the tragedy of lost direction and lack of knowledge” (Frye, *Anatomy* 222). Finally, the sixth phase of tragedy presents “a world of shock and horror in which the central images are image of *sparagmos*, that is cannibalism, mutilation, and torture” (Frye, *Anatomy* 222). In the sixth phase, the hero is often villainous because he exists in a state of agony or humiliation (Frye, *Anatomy* 222).

William G. Doty has observed a declining influence of myth criticism; nevertheless, he contends that this branch of literary criticism deserves “to remain a lively component of complex and robust criticism that is aware of possible prefigurative and intertextual aspects in literary work, that does not hesitate to explore the ways prefigurations may have enriched the author’s expression or the reader’s comprehension of it” (248). Doty has outlined four relationships between myths and literary works. First, he asserts that a myth, or mythic themes, images and characters, may prefigure the development of a later author’s writing (248). He also suggests that mythic themes, figures, or stories may have a more direct influence upon the later work, suggesting the names of particular characters, for instance (248). The plot pattern of a myth or legend may be influential in the shaping of the plot of a later work, which does not necessarily explicitly identify a specific myth or mythological system (249). Finally, later works

may retell myths or legends, explicitly intending the later work to be a contemporary adaptation of the earlier work (249).

“The Swimmer” has received significant critical attention by scholars, perhaps more so than any of his other works of fiction, including his novels. Due to its inscrutability, scholars have presented multiple divergent interpretations of the story, an academic phenomenon which Cheever warily labeled “an idle occupation,” insisting that the story “should be taken at face value”:

Any questions about the story seem to me to imply that the story has failed—it should be taken at face value. The fact that the constellations change, that the foliage changes, that all time is completely dislocated or altered in the story, ought to be taken at face value. However, as a parody of what can be done academically with the story, you can begin with the level that this is simply a reference to Ovid. And this is Narcissus, of course, and it is his face that he is pursuing, and this is the pursuit of death. It can—from the communist point of view (and it’s a very popular story in Russia)—be an example of the artificiality of a personality based entirely on consumer consumption. You can cut down through about seven layers of the story, if you feel like it. I think it’s an idle occupation—and if it can’t be taken at its surface value, that is, if it doesn’t have a response in the reader, then of course it’s failed.

(Donaldson, *Conversations* 63).

Chief among those scholars engaged in Cheever’s self-described “idle occupation” of literary scholarship are Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet, who, from the

period 1984 to 2001, co-authored fourteen short articles interpreting “The Swimmer” from multiple perspectives, including myth. Although not expressly grounded in the archetypal critical principles advanced by Jung and Frye, these mythic readings do suggest that “The Swimmer” contains an overall structure or mythic development that is consistent with archetypal literary theories and point to the suitability of archetypal literary criticism as a lens through which to analyze “The Swimmer,” as presented in this thesis.

Blythe and Sweet contend that Cheever uses classical allusions in “The Swimmer” to represent Ned’s conflict between the competing value systems of the family represented by classical goddesses, Juno and Aphrodite. Ned’s wife Lucinda represents traditional family ethos because her name is derived from “Lucina,” an epithet for Juno, the Roman goddess associated with protection in childbirth and domestic affairs (Blythe and Sweet, “Classical Allusions” 1). These values contrast with those represented by the Greek goddess Aphrodite whose statue sits on the hall table in Ned’s house (Blythe and Sweet, “Classical Allusions” 1). According to Blythe and Sweet, Cheever’s allusion to Aphrodite emphasizes Ned’s ethical reality and his lack of devotion to traditional family ethos, also exemplified by Ned’s ex-mistress, Shirley Adams, a surrogate for Aphrodite, who is Ned’s final human contact in the story (Blythe and Sweet, “Classical Allusions” 1). These classical allusions help the reader recognize a truth that eludes Ned “that the Aphrodite and Lucina ethoses are irreconcilable and that a quest for one ethic undertaken in the name of the other is destined for failure” (Blythe and Sweet, “Classical Allusions” 1).

Perhaps following up on Cheever's observation about the story's possible relationship to the myth of Narcissus, Blythe and Sweet have also analyzed the story as a re-telling of that myth, which reveals Ned's "refusal to mature past self-love" (Blythe and Sweet, "Narcissus" 8). Blythe and Sweet point out that the reader's introduction to Ned replicates Narcissus' pose beside a pool of water (Blythe and Sweet, "Narcissus" 8). This motif is reinforced throughout the story, as Ned dives into pool after pool, always alone and forever seeking his image (Blythe and Sweet, "Narcissus" 8). According to Blythe and Sweet, this theme culminates in his encounter with his former mistress, Shirley Adams, who, like the weeping women in the Narcissus myth, had wept when Ned ended their affair (Blythe and Sweet, "Narcissus" 9). Obsessed with his own image like Narcissus, Ned ends up with nothing (Blythe and Sweet, "Narcissus" 9).

Blythe and Sweet have also analyzed the character of Ned Merrill as a heroic figure, using both the Grail quest based on Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* and Homer's *Odyssey*. Blythe and Sweet's contention that "The Swimmer" is a modern version of the Grail myth rests on their assertion that the story depicts a world "devoid of spiritual meaning and filled with materialism" (Blythe and Sweet, "Dark Knight" 347). Much like other Grail heroes, Ned "decides to set off on a perilous quest" to reach his home by water (Blythe and Sweet, "Dark Knight" 348). Contending that Ned Merrill is the embodiment of the Fisher King, Blythe and Sweet catalog various obstacles in his journey which they assert correspond with traditional Grail obstacles (Blythe and Sweet, "Dark Knight" 348). For example, when a thunderstorm erupts midway through the story, Ned must seek shelter in the Levy's gazebo, a version of the Chapel Perilous (Blythe and Sweet, "Dark Knight" 348).

Blythe and Sweet's analysis of the Grail myth also highlights differences between Ned Merrill and the traditional Grail hero, chiefly Ned's failure "to ask the proper questions and to find suitable answers" (Blythe and Sweet, "Dark Knight" 349). Unlike the traditional Grail hero, Ned's constant state is one of disappointment and mystification rather than of growing enlightenment (Blythe and Sweet, "Dark Knight" 350). The traditional Grail hero "arrives at the Grail castle, and if worthy (proven by brave deeds and proper questions), he is granted a vision of the Grail," after which "the Fisher King is healed and the land restored" (Blythe and Sweet, "Dark Knight" 351). By contrast, Ned Merrill arrives home in a state of exhausted bewilderment (Blythe and Sweet, "Dark Knight" 351). According to Blythe and Sweet, this ending communicates Cheever's view that Ned is a captive of the modern myths of Mammonism and the cult of youth and is, therefore, an unworthy questor" (Blythe and Sweet, "Dark Knight" 350). The story "reveals the ironic gap between [Ned's] selfish search for his own youth as well as materialism and the traditional Grail hero's selfless, community-serving quest" (Blythe and Sweet, "Dark Knight" 351). As exemplified by Ned Merrill, modern man "has lost his spiritual bearings and the life-saving waters are used solely for pleasurable swims" (Blythe and Sweet, "Dark Knight" 351).

Blythe and Sweet also observe parallels between "The Swimmer" and Homer's *Odyssey*, pointing to a "broad correspondence" in that "both stories focus on a male hero's attempt to return home after waging war, on the windy plains of Troy and on the Sunday cocktail circuit" and "follow the pattern of an epic journey by water, the open sea vs. the Lucinda River (a series of suburban swimming pools)" (Blythe and Sweet, "Odyssey" 3-4). Both explorers are younger men at the start of their journey but are

much older when they arrive home (Blythe and Sweet, “Odyssey” 4). Blythe and Sweet observe another parallel in that “[b]oth men have a wife and progeny awaiting them” (Blythe and Sweet, “Odyssey” 4); however, they may be overstating the story’s plot with this assertion: Ned hopes to return home to his wife and four daughters, but they do not “await” him at the end of the story.

Blythe and Sweet assert that Cheever establishes these parallels to highlight the ultimate differences between the characters of Ned and Odysseus. They contend that a crucial difference between the two characters is that “Odysseus yearns for the values of home and family, rejecting the very thing (eternal life and youth) for which Ned sacrifices everything (including his wife and family)” (Blythe and Sweet, “Odyssey” 4); however, their contention that Ned has sacrificed his family for “eternal life and youth” lacks explicit support in the text. Blythe and Sweet contend that the characters’ respective homecomings reveal their chief differences. Odysseus is reunited with his wife and male heir; Ned, on the other hand, “discovers an empty, dilapidated house with his wife and daughters vanished . . .” (Blythe and Sweet, “Odyssey” 4). According to Blythe and Sweet, these differences contrast the heroic values of Greek culture centered on family and honor with the empty ethics of the suburban American centered on materialism instead of family and honor (Blythe and Sweet, “Odyssey” 4). Thus, Blythe and Sweet’s Odyssean interpretation appears to rest on the failure of the American Dream.

Blythe and Sweet have also interpreted the character of Ned Merrill as a Biblical Adam and Ned’s odyssey as a fall from Eden (Blythe and Sweet, “Failed Adam” 10). They point out the parallel between Ned and the Biblical Adam, likening Ned’s

commitment to the false values of materialism and social status to Adam's violation of God's prohibition by eating the forbidden fruit (Blythe and Sweet, "Failed Adam" 11). According to Blythe and Sweet, the story's ending showing a family in trouble is akin to the curse that God placed on Adam; thus, they see the story's conclusion in the season of autumn as symbolic of Ned's fall (Blythe and Sweet, "Failed Adam" 11).

Nathan Cervo, on the other hand, has developed a reading based on the myth of Pluto and Persephone, contending that the character of Ned Merrill is dead, having committed prior suicide. Thus, under Cervo's interpretation, the story is a recounting of Ned's journey through rivers of the Underworld, represented by the string of swimming pools, toward Hades. Pluto and Persephone are represented by the elderly Hallorans whose swimming pool represents the River Styx (49). Ned's forgetfulness can be explained under this paradigm because he is "actually swimming in the River Lethe, the Underworld River of Forgetfulness" (50).

Cervo points to several narrative details to support his contention that the character of Ned Merrill has committed suicide. Suicide is first suggested, according to Cervo, by the narrator's description of Ned's house as being eight miles to the south in Bullet Park based on Cervo's elaborate and somewhat tortured view that the reflecting double zeros comprising the number eight are an indication of Ned's subterranean nothingness and financial failure (50). Ned's wanderings throughout the story re-trace "the fitful content of his disremembered strategy of stowing his treasure on earth rather than in heaven" (50). Cervo contends that the narrator provides an early clue as to the manner of Ned's suicide from asphyxiation in the name "Westerhazy," combining



“wester” meaning “to go west,” a symbol for dying, and “hazy” evoking the haze of the carbon monoxide fumes in Merrill’s garage (50).

Lynne Waldeland has noted the story’s indeterminacy, observing that the story is “reminiscent of some of Hawthorne’s in the reader’s difficulty in ascertaining exactly what happened” (95). Waldeland contends that the story’s primary objective is “the juxtaposition of the celebratory motive of Neddy’s act with the social realities that emerge as the story progresses, realities that have to do with the role wealth and social status play in this world that Neddy wishes to invest with legendary beauty and meaning,” its abrupt and indeterminate ending leaving “the reader with a residual uneasiness” (95). Like Waldeland, Blake Bailey, one of Cheever’s biographers, has observed the story’s indeterminacy, contending that “one of the story’s pleasant ambiguities is whether the seasons change as a matter of magical realism or as an aspect of Ned’s delusions” (317).

Other critics have focused specifically on Ned’s drinking as the source of the story’s conflict. Scott Donaldson, another Cheever biographer, has observed that the story is pervaded by a sense of vulnerability in the figure of its main character, Ned Merrill, who has “lost everything: his job, his wife and four beautiful daughters, his friends, his youth” (211). Drawing parallels between Ned’s predicament and Cheever’s own life, Donaldson contends that Ned’s drinking “has led to his ruin” (211). Patrick Meanor also interprets the story as “an obvious descent into alcoholic insanity from years of prolonged drinking” (121). According to Meanor, Ned’s self-perception as a mythic hero is an example of “narcissistic solipsism” which is characteristic of late-state alcoholism just prior to death or institutionalization (121). James E. O’Hara views Ned’s

drinking as “part of a larger pattern of willful oblivion” in which Ned represses his problems, choosing “to lose touch with the truth rather than suffer under its crushing weight” (70).

Alcoholism as the potential cause of Ned’s downfall has been advanced by Blythe and Sweet, who note that the story contains nearly thirty references to drinking (Blythe and Sweet, “Alcoholism” 9). They contend that alcoholic blackouts could account for Ned’s memory loss and forgetfulness which he suffers during the course of the story (Blythe and Sweet, “Alcohol” 10).

George W. Hunt interprets Ned’s oblivion as existential in nature with roots in physical aging and psychological repression. Hunt views the story as a meditation on time akin to stories like Ambrose Bierce’s “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” that “concentrates in an imaginative instant the passing of a lifetime” (282). According to Hunt, Ned’s progressive weariness signifies both Ned’s physical aging which he refuses to acknowledge and his psychological fatigue resulting from denial and untruth (282).

Certain scholars have focused on the importance of the story’s imagery as a means to understand the story and trace Ned’s emotional and physical decline. According to Edward C. Reilly, the use of autumnal imagery “underscores Ned’s futile attempt to recapture the time past and the things lost” (12). Blythe and Sweet emphasize the shift in weather as a means to underscore Ned’s unchanging perception, asserting that Cheever’s manipulation of the atmospheric medium “helps his audience to discern the ironic gap between Ned Merrill’s dream of recovering his youth and the reality that it is gone forever” (Blythe and Sweet, “Ironic Nature” 4). They also point to the changes in foliage, temperature, and climate as supporting their contention that the story does not

take place on a single day; rather, each of the swimming pools visited by Ned “is in reality a separate event on a different Sunday” (Blythe and Sweet, “Man-Made” 416).

William Rodney Allen uses the story’s central image of the swimming pool to observe parallels between “The Swimmer” and *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. For example, Allen contends that Ned Merrill’s story begins “where Gatsby’s ends: in the swimming pool, one of the American emblems of wealth and ease” (290). Allen views Jay Gatsby as “Neddy’s spiritual forebear, for both men are guilty of narcissism” (291). According to Allen, Gatsby’s attempts to stop time, indicated by his famous remark that the past can be repeated, is carried to the extreme in “The Swimmer” with Ned’s complete forgetfulness that he has lost his social standing, money, and family (292). Allen notes that both Gatsby and Ned are swimmers but both swim out of season (293). In addition, both stories end at the empty houses of their protagonists, which Allen contends is Cheever’s final unmistakable nod to Fitzgerald’s great novel (293).

This thesis adds to these interpretations with its analysis of “The Swimmer” using Frye’s archetypal theory of the monomyth. A model subject for archetypal criticism, the story even uses comparable seasonal imagery correlating with Frye’s circular diagram of the four *mythoi* to trace Ned’s decline: the changing seasons from summer to autumn during the course of the story mirror Ned Merrill’s physical and emotional decline and his transition from romantic to tragic hero. In addition, consistent with Doty’s observation about the importance of myth in literary criticism, Cheever uses the similarities in the plot patterns of “The Swimmer” and Homer’s *Odyssey* to heighten the dramatic irony of Ned’s climactic homecoming. The character of Ned Merrill also typifies the Jungian archetype of the *puer aeternus*, the eternal child.

To support these contentions, this thesis draws on relevant material from Cheever's journals. Meticulously kept from 1934 until his death in 1982, the journals document the details of Cheever's personal life and literary career (Bosha, *Journals* 202). They are a *mélange* containing Cheever's most private reflections along with accounts of routine domestic and literary activities, including notes on "The Swimmer." Despite their literary significance, they have not been widely used by scholars to analyze Cheever's fiction, and only limited portions of Cheever's journals have been published. The entire contents of Cheever's journals are housed at the Houghton Library, Harvard University, the relevant portions of which have been examined as part of the research for this thesis.

In addition to his journals, Cheever's formal literary manuscripts, consisting primarily of fair or clean copies, are preserved at Brandeis University's Goldfarb Library. Although these manuscripts are final versions as submitted to the publisher, at times Cheever made post-submission changes to these manuscripts, even re-writing sections, which have been preserved as part of the manuscript archive. In some cases, these changes are helpful in understanding the story's ultimate direction and meaning. Research for this thesis includes analysis of the literary manuscript of "The Swimmer." Thus, using the archetypal approach of Carl Jung as interpreted by Northrop Frye, supplemented by relevant material from Cheever's journals and manuscript archives, this thesis presents a new reading of "The Swimmer."

## CHAPTER II

### The Genesis of “The Swimmer”

The publication of Cheever’s short story “Expelled” in 1930 in the *New Republic* marked the beginning of Cheever’s career as a short story writer and novelist, which lasted over fifty years (Cowley 1). The story is a fictionalized account of Cheever’s expulsion from Thayer Academy, which prompted his move to New York City as an eighteen-year-old to begin a literary career (Cowley 1). Cheever addressed his manuscript of “Expelled” to Malcolm Cowley, at the time a junior editor at the *New Republic*, who edited and eventually got the story published (Cowley 1). Shortly after Cheever’s death in 1982, Cowley published a tribute to Cheever in the *Sewanee Review* in which he expressed his initial reaction to reading the story as one of “hearing for the first time the voice of a new generation” (Cowley 1).

Cowley was responsible for offering influential interpretations and promoting the careers of many notable American writers of the last century, including Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and F. Scott Fitzgerald (Bak xxv). Cowley viewed Cheever as a worthy successor to this esteemed generation of American writers, identifying him as “the one who stands closest in spirit to the giants of the preceding era” (Cowley 13). Thus, his support of Cheever was resolute. In a 1961 letter to Evan Thomas, an editor at the publishing house of Harper and Row, Cowley wrote:

It seems to me that Cheever has slowly and imperceptibly become one of this country’s important writers. He’s an accurate and realistic observer, but at the same time he is an apocalyptic poet of the prosperous middle classes. He catches his characters at the moment when they have been driven beyond endurance by the strain of being successful, intelligent,

happily married, and just like everyone else in their highly restricted suburb.

Lately he has been developing a special quality of vision. The observation is as accurate as before, but now it's as if everything were being seen through slightly distorted lenses of moving water; the furniture is shaky, the walls are askew, the old people are dying in neighborhoods where death is strictly forbidden under the zoning regulations, the children are crying for love or bread, and pretty soon all these persons, places, and things are going to be exploded into a mushroom cloud, leaving nothing but Cheever's accurate and inalterable prose. (Bak 550)

After Cheever's death, Cowley observed that beginning with the publication of Cheever's first novel, *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957), for which Cheever won the National Book Award for Fiction in 1958, Cheever's writing changed. It was Cowley who coined the moniker, "Ovid of the New York suburbs," to describe Cheever during this period:

Until that time he had been regarded as a typical *New Yorker* storywriter, but he wasn't ever that. He pushed his *New Yorker* stories behind him and began writing magical fairy stories—"Metamorphoses," he called some of them, and that was a key word. Perhaps he became an Ovid of the New York suburbs. The *New Yorker* wouldn't print his stories any longer; they were too fabulous and grotesque, but some of them were masterpieces. And his narrative prose made me feel when reading it that I had groped beneath roots in a stream and taken a live trout in my hands. (Bak 685)

In an October 22, 1963 letter to Cheever, Cowley praised Cheever's "continual power of invention": ". . . you throw away more than most writers amass over the years by saving up their little inspirations, as if you didn't have to save, as if there were always more inventions coming from that inexhaustible store" (Bak 574). In the same letter, Cowley reiterated Cheever's place as an "apocalyptic poet of the prosperous middle classes," described in his earlier letter to Evan Thomas: "The terrible vision you have is of our daily lives in their emotional squalor and incongruity" (Bak 574).

Cowley's comments in his October, 1963 letter were directed toward Cheever's second novel, *The Wapshot Scandal* (1964), a sequel to his award-winning *The Wapshot Chronicle*; however, they could be applied with equal force to Cheever's short story "The Swimmer," which Cheever completed during this same time period in December, 1963 (MS, Series 1, Box 2, Folder 35). The story of a middle-aged man who grows old within the course of a single summer afternoon, "The Swimmer" lavishly displays Cheever's "continual power of invention" observed by Cowley and affirms the aptness of Cheever's moniker as an "Ovid of the New York suburbs."

The short story was Cheever's primary literary vehicle and one for which he was not only well-known but also highly regarded. *The Stories of John Cheever* won the 1979 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Cheever's success was not accidental; rather, it was based on specific theories of short story craftsmanship, which are recognizable in his great works of short fiction. According to Cheever, first of all, the compressed length of the short story dictates that a writer must "be in there on every word; every verb has to be lambent and strong" (Donaldson, *Conversations* 17). Cheever viewed fiction as a form of experimentation with language: "One never puts down a sentence without the feeling

that it has never been put down before in such a way, and that perhaps even the substance of the sentence has never been felt” (Donaldson, *Conversations* 105).

In addition, Cheever believed that the short story was particularly effective “in dealing with interrupted human relationships” (Donaldson, *Conversations* 45). Cheever viewed the genre “as being suited to experience that is episodic and characterized by its episodic nature, its intensity, and very often its interruptive quality” (Donaldson, *Conversations* 163). Cheever used the word “burst” to describe the short story, a feature which distinguishes it from the longer format of the novel: “. . . a burst in a novel is to destroy the architecture of the novel, of course. The intensities of the novel . . . all have to be interrelated, all the way through the novel. If you had a successful, as you say, *burst* in a novel, people would then close the novel and think—why should I read any further” (Donaldson, *Conversations* 164). Unlike the conventional novel, the short story typically concerns an “intense encounter” about which the reader often does not know the beginning or the end (Donaldson, *Conversations* 45). Cheever’s “intense encounter” aptly characterizes the plot of “The Swimmer,” which leaves its main character peering into the windows of his locked and abandoned house.

Although Cheever had finished writing “The Swimmer” by December, 1963 (MS, Series 1, Box 2, Folder 35), its publication in *The New Yorker* was postponed until July 18, 1964 (Cheever, *New Yorker* 28), perhaps because the story’s subject matter seemed more fitting for summertime publication. Cheever included the story in a collection of his short stories entitled *The Brigadier and the Golf Widow* published later that year.



Set on a Sunday afternoon in late summer, the “The Swimmer” recounts the journey of suburbanite Ned Merrill, who, while attending the Westerhazys’ poolside party, decides to swim home via sixteen pools to his house in nearby Bullet Park. Ned names this series of sequential pools the “Lucinda River” after his wife (*BGW* 62). Ned’s swimming adventure gets off to an energetic and enthusiastic start as he greets friends along the route, but mid-way through his journey, things begin to change: Ned experiences growing fatigue, which is accompanied by apparent changes in the seasons and constellations and a blurring of time itself. He is no longer enthusiastically welcomed by friends whose comments suggest that Ned has experienced personal and financial misfortune that he himself cannot remember. Ned finally reaches home, where, expecting to find his wife and daughters waiting for him, he finds instead a locked and abandoned house.

Cheever was especially proud of “The Swimmer.” Responding to questions in a 1976 interview, Cheever stated that he was “enormously happy” with the story (Donaldson, *Conversations* 63-4). Its composition, however, was arduous. Cheever confessed that “I don’t think I’ve ever worked so long on a short story” (Donaldson, *Conversations* 63-4). Unlike most of his other short stories, which were usually written in three days, “The Swimmer” took two months to write (Donaldson, *Conversations* 63-4). Cheever claimed to have made over 150 pages of notes for the story, only to burn them later (Donaldson, *Conversations* 63). Cheever’s extant journals, however, contain notes and impressions which strongly correlate with story details, suggesting that the journals were also an important part of Cheever’s creative process in writing “The Swimmer.”

According to Cheever, the story's genesis was autobiographical:

I suppose the origin is simply the pleasure I took sitting at the edge of a swimming pool on a summer's day on which everyone drank too much. Also, the story is more or less factual in that occasionally someone will come to the country to interview me, and say "Well, how did you think of the story?" And I say, "All right, well, get your trunks on and I'll show you"—and I'll take him through seven pools (which usually exhausts them). And they get on a train, or drive home again. But the impulse to write the story was sitting on the edge of a pool on a summer's day after a night on which I had drunk too much. (Donaldson, *Conversations* 63)

Much like Cheever's own experience, "The Swimmer" does, in fact, open with its main character, Ned Merrill, sitting poolside with a drink in his hand on a Sunday afternoon in mid-summer; however, Cheever's "continual power of invention," observed by Cowley and exemplified by the story's anguished plot of a man who swims home pool-to-pool only to reach an abandoned house, lifts "The Swimmer" out of the realm of autobiography thinly disguised as prose fiction. Cheever himself made the frequent observation in interviews that fiction is not "crypto-autobiography," a term he apparently coined (Donaldson, *Conversations* 29). Instead, Cheever saw fiction as "mysterious union of fact and imagination," concluding that gratifying works of fiction are those in which "the writer is able to present the reader with a memory he has already possessed, but has not comprehended" (Donaldson, *Conversations* 155-56). Cheever's conclusion recalls Jung's theory of the collective unconscious. It also suggests Frye's theory of the monomyth, as discussed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER III

### “The Swimmer” as Frye’s Tragic Mythos of Autumn

“The Swimmer” is a tragedy disguised as a “summer story,” an epithet which Cheever used to refer to his story in its early stages:

Now an autumn day and I think ruefully, petulantly that autumn is coming on and I have not tasted an hour of summer, but this is a lie. In the old matchboard bedroom on the river I got a mouthful [sic] of summer and if I didn’t swim for hours it was because I was restless and anxious. There was plenty of water and sunny rocks to lie on. Now I will try to outline the summer story, although I do not want to write crypto-autobiography.

(Cheever, *Journals* 11.1.4)

Cheever’s entry indicates that he began writing his “summer story” as “autumn [was] coming on,” suggesting a relationship between Cheever’s art and life, even though he vowed against writing “crypto-autobiography.” As a creative work of fiction, however, the story lives up to Cheever’s description of it as “a sleight of hand” (Donaldson, *Conversations* 64), in which, before the reader’s very eyes, Cheever transforms his “summer story” into a tragedy about irrevocable loss.

“The Swimmer” begins on a “midsummer day” (*BGW* 61), a season of the year corresponding to Frye’s mythos of romance. Its protagonist, Ned Merrill, is also compared to a summer’s day (*BGW* 62), suggesting his status as a romantic hero. However, during the course of Ned’s swim, the season mysteriously starts to shift from summer to autumn, accompanied by Ned’s physical and emotional decline and revealing the story’s underlying mythos of autumn or tragedy, consistent with Frye’s theory of the

monomyth. As explained in Chapter One, Frye identified four *mythoi* comprising the central unifying myth, or the monomyth, corresponding to the four seasons: comedy (spring), romance (summer), tragedy (fall), and winter (irony or satire).

Initially, “The Swimmer” appears to be a summer story, exhibiting Frye’s third phase of a romance, as Ned, lounging poolside on a summer Sunday afternoon, envisions his quest of swimming home via a series of sequential swimming pools to “enlarge and celebrate the day” (*BGW* 62). Designing his route based on “remembered or imaginary” charts and maps, he idealizes himself as “a pilgrim, an explorer, a man with a destiny,” for whom “friends would line the banks of the Lucinda River” (*BGW* 63); however, once Ned reaches the midpoint of his swim at the Levys’ pool and gazebo, the story shifts into its autumn phase, representing Ned’s inexorable emotional and physical decline. From this point forward in the story, Ned’s encounters are increasingly disappointing and ominous.

The story’s shifting mythos is prefigured by Ned’s initial conception of his plan: “Then it occurred to him that by taking a dogleg to the southwest he could reach his home by water” (*BGW* 62). When diagrammed on a circle, the romance phase (summer) is located at the top, the antiromance phase (winter) is located on the bottom, with the comedy phase (spring) to the right of the middle of the circle across from the tragic phase (fall) (Bressler 133). These points on the circle correspond to north-south-east-west points on a compass. Thus, Ned’s description of his journey as “a dogleg to the southwest” provides the reader with a subtle clue that his summer story is, in fact, a tragedy.

The downward movement of Ned's journey obeys the dynamic principles of Frye's theory of the monomyth:

The illustration of the natural cycle is the world of romance and the analogy of innocence; the lower half is the world of "realism" and the analogy of experience. There are thus four main types of mythical movement: within romance, within experience, down, and up. The downward movement is the tragic movement, the wheel of fortune falling from innocence toward hamartia, and from hamartia to catastrophe. The upward movement is the comic movement, from threatening complications to a happy ending and a general assumption of post-dated innocence in which everyone lives happily ever after. (Frye, *Anatomy* 162)

Loren Bell contends that the story's mid-summer setting invites comparisons with Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (433). According to Bell, Shakespeare's play, like Cheever's short story, involves a "mystifying confusion of the seasons" (433). Bell quotes these lines from the play to establish the works' similarity:

The spring, the summer,

The chiding autumn, angry winter, change

Their wonted liveries; and the mazed world,

By their increase, now knows not which is which. (II.i.11-114) (433)

Bell asserts that "The Swimmer," like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, exemplifies a dream motif in which Ned Merrill experiences "a dream of heroic exploration which ends with a desolate vision within a mid-summer's nightmare" (433). As true as Bell's interpretation

may be, such similarities also indicate that in their allusions to the seasons of the year, both works are consistent with Frye's theory of the monomyth.

The story's archetypal framework is apparent in its opening sentence: "It was one of those midsummer Sundays when everyone sits around saying: 'I *drank* too much last night'" (*BGW* 61) (emphasis in original). Rather than being situated precisely in time, the story begins on "one of those midsummer Sundays," as people lament how much they have had to drink the night before, a gesture of endless repetition unfixed in time:

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. (*BGW* 61)

The first paragraph ends with the separate confessions of Donald Westerhazy, his wife Helen, and Ned's wife, Lucinda, of drinking too much the night before. The locus of these confessions—the edge of the Westerhazys' pool—is revealed in the next paragraph, which introduces the story's main character, Ned Merrill, lounging poolside with a drink in his hand:

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. (*BGW* 61-2)

Compared to a summer's day, Ned releases his youthful enthusiasm by sliding down the banister and smacking a statue of the goddess Aphrodite.

Scholars have observed the obvious allusion to Shakespeare's Sonnet XVIII, "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summers Day," in the narrator's description of Ned, including Blythe and Sweet (Blythe and Sweet, "Shakespeare" 12). Cheever's journals reveal that he was reading a book on the Shakespearean sonnets while he was at work on "The Swimmer" (Cheever, *Journals* 11.1.7). In addition, the description of Ned sliding down the banister appears to be drawn from Cheever's own experience. His journals document his observation of "a man of fifty sliding down a banister. Late at night stealing a sign that says: Horses Only" (Cheever, *Journals* 11.1.20).

Ned has "a vague and modest idea of himself as a legendary figure" (*BGW* 62). Thus, he devises a plan of epic proportions befitting his status as a "legendary figure": "Then it occurred to him that by taking a dogleg to the southwest he could reach his home by water" (*BGW* 62). Ned's apparent purpose is likewise grandiloquently expressed: "The day was beautiful and it seemed to him that a long swim might enlarge and celebrate its beauty" (*BGW* 62).

Ned's "vague and modest idea of himself as a legendary figure" (*BGW* 62) reveals his inflated and limited self-awareness, dampening the credibility of Ned's plan to swim home. The narrator's repeated use of the word "seem" in presenting his scheme emphasizes Ned's limited awareness. Ned "seemed to see" the string of swimming pools

that curve across the county (*BGW* (62)). It “seemed to [Ned]” that a long swim through these pools would celebrate the beauty of the day (*BGW* 62).

In addition, the narrator carefully crafts his description of Ned to suggest a disparity of awareness between Ned and the narrator and, ultimately, the reader. For example, the narrator states that Ned “seemed” to have the slenderness of youth, indicating that Ned’s youthful self-perception may not be entirely accurate (*BGW* 62). The narrator similarly qualifies his Shakespearean comparison of Ned to a summer’s day, stating that Ned “might” be so compared and that the comparison is more particularly to “the last hours” of a summer’s day (*BGW* 62). The narrator bases his description of Ned on facade and outward appearance: Ned gives the “impression” of “youth, sport, and clement weather” (*BGW* 62).

After deciding to swim home, Ned designs his route even though “[t]he only maps and charts he had to go by were remembered or imaginary”:

First there were the Grahams, the Hammers, the Lears, the Howlands, and the Crosscups. He would cross Ditmar Street to the Bunkers and come, after a short portage, to the Levys, the Welchers and the public pool in Lancaster. Then there were the Hallorans, the Sachses, the Biswangers, Shirley Adams, the Gilmartins, and the Clydes. (*BGW* 63)

Ned sets out on his journey with a purposeful sense of optimism bordering on grandiosity, looking forward to encountering friends along the route:

His heart was high and he ran across the grass. Making his way home by an uncommon route gave him the feeling that he was a pilgrim, an explorer, a man with destiny, and he knew that he would find friends all



along the way; friends would line the banks of the Lucinda River. (*BGW* 63)

Almost immediately, however, it becomes apparent to the reader, if not to Ned, that things are amiss. At the second house, Mrs. Hammer looks up from her roses to see someone swim by “although she wasn’t quite sure who it was” (*BGW* 64). The Lears only *hear* Ned “splashing past their windows” (*BGW* 64). The Howlands and the Crosscups “were away” (*BGW* 64). When Ned reaches the Bunkers’ pool to find a pool party in progress, he is confronted by Enid Bunker: ““Oh look who’s here! What a marvelous surprise! When Lucinda said you couldn’t come I thought I’d *die*”” (*BGW* 65) (emphasis in original). Ned offers no response to this curious greeting. Only minutes earlier, both Lucinda and Ned were at the Westerhazys’ pool party. Enid Bunker’s greeting leaves the reader wondering for an explanation: has Lucinda simply made excuses for Ned’s absence rather than her own so that both could attend the Westerhazys’ party, or is story’s time continuum becoming more fluid? The narrator’s manipulation of time becomes even more pronounced as the story progresses.

Ned’s arrival at the Levys’ house builds on this ambiguity and marks a turning point in the story. The Levys’ house is deserted, a plot development which prefigures the story’s ending: “All the doors and windows of the big house were open but there were no signs of life; not even a dog barked. [Ned] went around the side of the house to the pool and saw that the Levys had only recently left” (*BGW* 65).

After swimming the length of the Levys’ pool, Ned observes that “he had swum nearly half the length of the Lucinda River” (*BGW* 66). Ned’s observation confirms that his journey is reaching its mid-point. It is then that Ned notices that the stand of cumulus

clouds observed at the Westerhazys' pool "had risen and darkened," presaging a coming storm (*BGW* 66). Hearing thunder overhead, Ned seeks refuge in the Levys' gazebo, which is hung with Japanese lanterns (*BGW* 66). Even amid the growing darkness, Ned still delights in his watery surroundings, hearing the "fine noise of rushing water from the crown of an oak at his back" and "the noise of fountains [coming] from the crowns of all 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, why did the first watery notes of a storm wind have for the unmistakable sound of good news, cheer, glad tidings? (*BGW* 66)

Ned's reverie, however, comes to an abrupt ending: "Then there was an explosion, a smell of cordite, and rain lashed the Japanese lanterns that Mrs. Levy had bought in Kyoto the year before last, or was it the year before that?" (*BGW* 66-7)

This passage exhibits the narrator's continuing manipulation of time. Ned is unable to recall the year in which Mrs. Levy purchased the Japanese lanterns swinging in the storm. The passage also contains a curious reference to an explosion accompanied "a smell of cordite," the significance of which has received little, if any, attention by scholars. In the *Dictionary of Explosives* (1920) cordite is defined as the principal smokeless powder of the British Services (24). Originally adopted in 1888, the explosive is made by mixing nitroglycerine with guncotton and mineral jelly and incorporating them together with the aid of acetone, which gelatinizes the gun-cotton (Marshall 24). Its use as ammunition for sporting rifles has been documented by Greener (650). Cheever's

reference to a cordite-propelled explosion appears unrelated to plot progression because the explosion receives no further mention in the text. Instead, its apparent purpose is to interrupt the narrative, marking the end of Ned's reverie and the beginning of his afflictions as he struggles to complete his swim.

Cheever's repeated use of auditory imagery in this passage conveys Ned's dimmed visual perception amid the growing darkness caused by the thunderstorm. Ned first hears "the percussiveness of thunder" and then sees a red de Havilland training plane overhead, imagining that he "could almost hear the pilot laugh with pleasure in the afternoon" (*BGW* 66). A distant "train whistle" is followed by the sound of "pin-headed birds," organizing their song "into some acute and knowledgeable recognition of the storm's approach" (*BGW* 66). Once the storm breaks, Ned hears "a fine noise of rushing water from the crown of an oak at his back, as if a spigot there had been turned" followed by "the noise of fountains [coming] from the crowns of all the tall trees" (*BGW* 66). This procession of sounds culminates in the explosion which ends Ned's reverie.

Waiting in the Levys' gazebo until the storm has passed, Ned begins to shiver in the cool air (*BGW* 67). He also notices that the wind has "stripped a maple of its red and yellow leaves and scattered them over the grass and water" (*BGW* 67). Ned attributes the tree's red and yellow leaves to blight "[s]ince it was midsummer" yet he feels "a peculiar sadness at this sign of autumn" (*BGW* 67). Ned's confusion about the changing seasons from summer to autumn is consistent with Frye's theory of the monomyth consisting of four phases corresponding to the seasons of the year. The mythos of summer is romance which conforms to the wish fulfillment dream (Frye, *Anatomy* 186). The complete form of the romance is the successful quest that has three main stages: the stage of the perilous

journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which the hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero (Frye, *Anatomy* 187). The mythos of autumn is tragedy in which the main characters are emancipated from dream into the natural order (Frye, *Anatomy* 206-07).

Ned's next stop after leaving the Levys' is the Welchers' pool; however, en route, Ned must first cross the Lindleys' riding ring, which he finds empty and in a state of disrepair, a condition which mirrors the story's downward movement toward tragedy:

“. . . he was surprised to find it overgrown with grass and all the jumps dismantled. He wondered if the Lindleys had sold their horses or gone away for the summer and put them out to board. He seemed to remember having heard something about the Lindleys and their horses but the memory was unclear. (*BGW* 67)

His stop at the Welchers' pool is equally disconcerting because their pool is dry (*BGW* 67):

This breach in the chain of water disappointed him absurdly, and he felt like some explorer who seeks a torrential headwater and finds a dead stream. He was disappointed and mystified. It was common enough to go away for the summer but no one ever drained his pool. The Welchers had definitely gone away. The pool furniture was folded, stacked, and covered with a tarpaulin. The bathhouse was locked. All the windows of the house were shut, and when he went around to the driveway in front he saw a for-sale sign nailed to a tree. (*BGW* 67)

The deteriorating conditions at the Lindleys' riding ring and the draining of the Welchers' pool, underscore the shifting of the story's mythic frame from romance (summer) to tragedy (autumn). Once favorably comparing himself to "an explorer, a man of destiny" (*BGW* 63), Ned now sees himself as a failed explorer "who seeks a torrential headwater and finds a dead stream" (*BGW* 67). His memory also continues to fail him: "When had he last heard from the Welchers—when, that is, had he and Lucinda last regretted an invitation to dine with them. It seemed only a week or so ago. Was his memory failing or had he so disciplined it in the repression of unpleasant facts that he had damaged his sense of truth?" (*BGW* 67-8). Nevertheless, Ned's spirits are momentarily revived when he hears "the sound of a tennis game" in the distance: "This cheered him, cleared away all his apprehensions and let him regard the overcast sky and the cold air with indifference. This was the day that Neddy Merrill swam across the county. That was the day! He started off then for his most difficult portage" (*BGW* 68).

Ned's declaration ends the first part of the story, which Cheever marks with a paragraph break. The narrator's change in reference from "This was the day . . ." to "That was the day!" suggests a shift from present to past tense which is consistent with the story's mythic shift from summer to autumn. Cheever commented in a 1976 interview that "The Swimmer" was a difficult story to write "[b]ecause I couldn't ever show my hand," suggesting that the story contains an element of surprise or veiled meaning (Donaldson, *Conversations* 110). Cheever elaborated:

Night was falling, the year was dying. It wasn't a question of technical problems, but one of imponderables. When he finds it's dark and cold, it has to have happened. And, by God, it did happen. I felt dark and cold

for a long time after I finished that story. As a matter of fact, it's one of the last stories I wrote for a long time. . . ." (Donaldson, *Conversations* 110)

Cheever's puzzling reference to an unidentified "it" that happens in the story has largely been overlooked by scholars in interpreting "The Swimmer," perhaps justifiably given the potential unreliability of writers' commentaries on their own works. However, Cheever's focus on cyclical patterns of daylight and darkness and changing seasons has archetypal overtones worthy of attention. His reference to the cold and darkness of Ned's surroundings is consistent with Ned's experience during the thunderstorm at the Levys' when "[i]t was suddenly growing dark" (*BGW* 66), and the rain-cooled air made him "shiver" (*BGW* 67). Cheever's reference to the "dying year" suggests the fallen "red and yellow leaves" of autumn, which Ned notices for the first time in the Levys' gazebo. Thus, Cheever's unidentified "it" could have several meanings, such as a mythic change of season from summer to autumn consistent with Frye's theory of the monomyth, or alternatively, Ned's metamorphosis from middle to old age manifested by his forgetfulness in recalling the year that Mrs. Levy purchased the Japanese lanterns. Or it could reflect Cheever's own experience of autumn, "the diving board, the gin, the falling leaves, the autumn afternoon" (Cheever, *Journals* 11.1.8).

The second half of Cheever's story begins as Ned is trying to cross a busy highway, Route 424, which separates the Welchers' pool from the next leg of his journey, the public pool at the Recreation Center of the Village of Lancaster (*BGW* 68-9). The momentary enthusiasm which Ned regained at the sound of the tennis game appears to

have vanished, as the narrator substitutes his own judgment for that of the reader in objectively assessing Ned's condition:

Had you gone for a Sunday afternoon ride that day you might have seen him, close to naked, standing on the shoulder of route 424, waiting for a chance to cross. You might have wondered if he was the victim of foul play, had his car broken down, or was he merely a fool. Standing barefoot in the deposits of the highway—beer cans, rags, and blowout patches—exposed to all kinds of ridicule, he seemed pitiful. (*BGW* 68)

The narrator's description contradicts Ned's perceptions of himself at the beginning of the story as a "legendary figure" who was "not a practical joker nor was he a fool" (*BGW* 62). These perceptions, formed "at the edge of the Westerhazys' pool" (*BGW* 61), have been replaced by contradictory impressions formed "on the shoulder of route 424." Instead of being compared "to a summer's day" (*BGW* 62), Ned resembles "a victim of foul play" or "merely a fool." The self-described "explorer" and "man with a destiny" (*BGW* 63) is now presented as an object of ridicule and pity surrounded by "beer cans, rags, and blowout patches" (*BGW* 68).

Nevertheless, Ned feels compelled to complete his journey:

He could have gone back, back to the Westerhazys,' where Lucinda would still be sitting in the sun. He had signed nothing, vowed nothing, pledged nothing not even to himself. Why, believing as he did, that all human obduracy was susceptible to common sense, was he unable to turn back? Why was he determined to complete his journey even if it meant putting his life in danger? At what point had this prank, this joke, this piece of

horseplay become serious? He could not go back. . . . In the space of an hour, more or less, he covered a distance that made his return impossible.

(*BGW* 68-9)

Ned's inability to turn back is an essential component of his journey. As Frye points out, as an archetypal motif, the journey is seldom a good thing in itself: "It is undertaken because it must be: if the journey is a metaphor for life, life has to be followed to the end, but the end is the point of the journey, or at least the quality of the end is" (Frye, *Myth* 221).

After crossing the highway with the help of "[a]n old man, tooling down the highway at fifteen miles an hour" (*BGW* 69), Ned walks to the public pool at the Recreation Center "at the edge of the Village of Lancaster" with its harsh noises and rigid protocol:

The effect of the water on voices, the illusion of brilliance and suspense, was the same here as it had been at the Bunkers' but the sounds were louder, harsher, and more shrill, and as soon as he entered the crowded enclosure he was confronted with regimentation, "ALL SWIMMERS MUST TAKE A SHOWER BEFORE USING THE POOL. ALL SWIMMERS MUST USE THE FOOTBATH. ALL SWIMMERS MUST WEAR THEIR IDENTIFICATION DISKS." (*BGW* 69)

The harsh sounds at the public pool contrast with the pleasant sounds of the tennis game that had earlier cheered Ned. He longingly remembers the sapphire water at the Bunkers' pool and worries that the "murk" of the public pool will "damage his own prosperousness and charm" (*BGW* 69); however, he reminds himself that he is "an explorer, a pilgrim,



and this [is] merely a stagnant bend in the Lucinda River” (*BGW* 69). But without the identification disk required by the pool’s regulations, Ned is ordered out of the pool by two lifeguards (*BGW* 69). Ned’s symbolic loss of identity at the public pool is part of his continuing physical and emotional decline.

At the next pool, he encounters the Hallorans, “an elderly couple of enormous wealth who seemed to bask in the suspicion that they might be communists” (*BGW* 70). Ned notices that the Hallorans’ beech hedge is yellow but attributes this phenomenon to blight like the Levys’ maple (*BGW* 70). Ned also removes his swimming trunks out of deference to the Hallorans who do not wear bathing suits (*BGW* 70). The Hallorans’ pool, the oldest in the county and fed by a brook, is the “opaque gold of the stream” (*BGW* 70). Ned explains to Mrs. Halloran that he is swimming across the county, to which Mrs. Halloran expresses surprise that such a feat is even possible: “ ‘Why, I didn’t know one could. . . .’ ” (*BGW* 71). Ned’s exchange with Mrs. Halloran introduces the possibility that Ned has suffered some type of personal or financial misfortune. Her voice filling the air with “unseasonable melancholy,” Mrs. Halloran expresses sympathy to hear about Ned’s “misfortunes,” including the sale of his house and some undisclosed consequence to his “poor children,” which Ned denies (*BGW* 71).

As he is leaving, Ned notices that his swimming trunks are loose and wonders if he has lost weight (*BGW* 71). Feeling cold and tired, he is depressed by the nakedness of the Hallorans and the “dark water” of their pool:

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 and he smelled woodsmoke on the wind. Who would be burning wood at this time of year? (*BGW 71*)

Ned's encounter at the Hallorans' pool accelerates the story's tragic mythos of autumn, symbolized by Mrs. Halloran's voice that fills the air with "unseasonable melancholy" and the yellow leaves of the Hallorans' beech hedge. The falling leaves and the wind-borne odor of burning wood suggest the colder weather of autumn and burning fireplaces. Ned himself feels "cold in his bones" and feels "that he might never be warm again." His apprehensions express both physical and emotional deprivation.

Ned's next stop is the "small pool" of the Hallorans' daughter Helen and her husband, Eric Sachs, another episode confirming Ned's memory loss and growing isolation (*BGW 72*). Asking for a drink because he has "taken a chill," Ned learns that the Sachses no longer have alcohol in their home because of Eric's abdominal surgery three years ago, of which Ned has no recollection: "Was he losing his memory, had his gift for concealing painful facts let him forget that he had sold his house, that his children were in trouble, and that his friend had been ill?" (*BGW 72*). The cold water of the Sachses' pool has left Ned "gasping, close to drowning. . . ." (*BGW 73*).

Crossing a field to the Biswangers' pool, Ned hears "sounds of revelry" from their pool party (*BGW 73*). Ned considers the Biswangers to be social-climbers who are "unwilling to comprehend the rigid and undemocratic realities of their society" (*BGW 73*). He approaches their pool with dread: "He went toward the pool with feelings of indifference, charity, and some unease, since it seemed to be getting dark and these were

the longest days of the year. . . . No one was swimming and the twilight, reflected on the water of the pool, had a wintry gleam” (*BGW* 73).

The “wintry gleam” of twilight reflected on the Biswangers’ pool is a foreshadowing of the story’s ironic ending underscored by Cheever’s use of the *Odyssey* as the story’s fundamental plot pattern, as will be discussed in Chapter Four. Under Frye’s theory of the monomyth, the phases of tragedy move from the heroic to the ironic, the first three corresponding to the first three phases of romance, the last three of irony (Frye, *Anatomy* 219). According to Frye, the ironic perspective in tragedy is attained by putting the character in a state of lower freedom than the audience (Frye, *Anatomy* 221). The tragic action of the fifth phase is the tragedy of lost direction and lack of knowledge (Frye, *Anatomy* 222). Ned’s lack of understanding and denial of his personal misfortune, reflected by exchanges with Mrs. Halloran and the Sachses, and his growing disillusionment, expressed as he approaches the Biswangers’ pool “with some unease,” conform to tragic action that is characteristic of the fifth phase of tragedy.

Ned’s encounter at the Biswangers’ pool party further exemplifies this tragic action resulting from lack of knowledge and lost direction. Ned is shunned not only by the party’s hostess Grace Biswanger, who labels him a “gatecrasher,” but also by the bartender, who “served him rudely” (*BGW* 74). As the story progresses, Ned moves in a world in which he loses status and social power, much like Frye’s ironic hero, a loss of status that confuses him. In this world, even the “the caterer’s men kept the social score” (*BGW* 74). Ned interprets the bartender’s rudeness as confirmation that “he had suffered some loss of social esteem,” although he holds onto the hope that perhaps the bartender’s rudeness only means that he is “new and uninformed” (*BGW* 74). Then Ned overhears

Grace Biswanger's conversation with a guest that Ned unexpectedly appeared at their house asking for five thousand dollars because he was broke (*BGW* 74).

After swimming the length of the Biswangers' pool, Ned leaves for the next pool on his list, which belongs to his ex-mistress, Shirley Adams. There Ned is hoping to heal the injuries suffered at the Biswangers' party: "If he had suffered any injuries at the Biswangers' they would be cured here. Love—sexual roughhouse in fact—was the supreme elixir, the painkiller, the brightly colored pill that would put the spring back into his step, the joy of life in his heart" (*BGW* 74).

Ned finds Shirley sitting "at the edge of the lighted, cerulean water" of her pool. She receives him, however, no more warmly than Grace Biswanger. When Ned informs Shirley that he is swimming across the county, Shirley curtly replies: "Good Christ. Will you ever grow up?" (*BGW* 75). She further announces that she will not give him any more money and refuses to give him a drink (*BGW* 75). Thus, Ned's encounter at Shirley's pool does not instill "the joy of life in his heart"; rather, it instills debilitating pain:

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, and he paddled to the ladder and climbed out. . . . Going out onto the dark lawn he smelled chrysanthemums or marigolds—some stubborn autumnal fragrance—on the night air, strong as gas. Looking overhead he saw that the stars had come out, but why should he seem to see Andromeda, Cepheus, and Cassiopeia? What had become of the constellations of midsummer? He began to cry. (*BGW* 75)

Frustrated and confused by the rudeness of the Biswangers' bartender and his ex-mistress, Ned concludes that he "[h]ad swum too long, he had been immersed too long. . . ." (BGW 75).

This episode at Shirley Adams' pool highlights Ned's growing fatigue and physical decline consistent with the passage's autumnal olfactory images of the fragrance of chrysanthemums or marigolds and the autumnal visual images of the constellations of Andromeda, Cepheus, and Cassiopeia, which Ned "seems to see," suggesting the possibility of disconnection between Ned's perception and reality. At the Gilmartins' pool, he is unable to dive in and instead uses the steps to enter the icy water, swimming a "hobbled side stroke that he might have used as a youth" (BGW 76). The "icy water" in the Gilmartins' pool suggests the passage of summer; the pool's temperature no longer exhibits summertime warmth. Staggering to the Clydes' pool, the last pool of his journey, Ned paddles its length, having to stop "again and again with his hand on the curb to rest," and finishing in a state of complete exhaustion and bewilderment:

He climbed up the ladder and wondered if he had the strength to get home. He had done what he wanted, he had swum the county, but he was so stupefied with exhaustion, that his triumph seemed vague. Stooped, holding onto the gateposts for support, he turned up the driveway of his own house. (BGW 76)

Having begun his swim with "the especial slenderness of youth" (BGW 62), Ned is now the physical manifestation of old age, "stooped" and requiring support to steady his walk like an old man with a cane.

Finding the house dark, Ned turns over a series of questions in his mind about the whereabouts of his family: “Was it so late that they had all gone to bed? Had Lucinda stayed at the Westerhazys’ for supper? Had the girls joined her there or gone someplace else? Hadn’t they agreed, as they usually did on Sunday, to regret all their invitations and stay at home?” (*BGW* 76). This last remark is particularly curious. If the family’s usual habit was to stay at home on Sundays, then why did Ned and Lucinda attend the Westerhazys’ Sunday afternoon pool party? Why does Ned even ponder the question since he is returning home himself, having spent the afternoon swimming the county? Or is it no longer Sunday afternoon? Cheever pondered similar questions in a journal entry made over the time period in which he composed “The Swimmer”: “Might the seasons change; might the leaves turn and begin to fall; might it grow cold; might there be snow, but what is the meaning of this. One does not grow old in the space of an afternoon. Oh well, kick it around” (Cheever, *Journals* 11.2.25).

As Ned arrives at his house, he tries the garage doors only to find that they have been locked so long that the rust from their handles comes off onto his hands (*BGW* 76). A loose rain gutter hangs over the front door, a condition which Ned attributes to the force of the thunderstorm and vows to fix in the morning (*BGW* 76). Likewise, Ned attributes the locked front door to the stupidity of the cook or the maid until he realizes “that it had been some time since they had employed a maid or a cook” (*BGW* 76). Unable to enter the house, Ned “shouted, pounded on the front door, tried to force it with his shoulder, and then looking in at the windows, saw that the place was empty” (*BGW* 76). The story ends with the solitary image of Ned Merrill shouting and pounding on the front door, only slowly and reluctantly realizing that the house is empty and in decay, and

his family is gone, completing the story's irreversible downward movement toward tragedy. Isolated from the rest of humanity, Ned is an embodiment of the tragic hero, as further discussed in Chapter Four.

## CHAPTER IV

### Ned Merrill as Tragic Hero

As we have seen, the complexity of “The Swimmer” is capable of supporting numerous readings. Cheever himself once admitted that the story “had countless interpretations” (Donaldson, *Conversations* 149). The purpose of this chapter is not to discredit other interpretations of the character of Ned Merrill; rather, it is to examine more closely the relationship of “The Swimmer” to Homer’s *Odyssey*, chiefly the juxtaposition of the romantic and tragic, which contributes to the dramatic irony of the story’s ending and emphasizes the magnitude of Ned’s loss.

Ned’s progression from his romantic self-perception as “a legendary figure” (*BGW* 62) to the isolated figure pounding on the door of his locked and abandoned house meets Frye’s definition of the tragic hero:

The tragic hero usually belongs of course to the *alazon* group, an impostor in the sense that he is self-deceived or made dizzy by hybris. In many tragedies he begins as a semi-divine figure, at least in his own eyes, and then an inexorable dialectic sets to work which separates the divine pretence from the human actuality. (Frye, *Anatomy* 217)

In contrast to comedy, which deals with characters in a social group, tragedy “is more concentrated on the single individual” (Frye, *Anatomy* 207). Frye asserted that “[t]he tragic hero is typically on top of the wheel of fortune, halfway between human society on the ground and the something greater in the sky” (Frye, *Anatomy* 207).

The narrator’s initial description of the resplendent Ned sitting at the edge of the Westerhazys’ pool against a backdrop of massive cumulus clouds perfectly matches



Frye's description of the tragic hero. The scene symbolizes Ned's position on fortune's wheel between "human society on the ground," symbolized by the Westerhazys' poolside party, and "the something greater in the sky," symbolized by the massive stand of clouds. The center of tragedy is the hero's isolation, even when the villain is, as he often is, a part of the hero himself (Frye, *Anatomy* 208).

Ned's "vague and modest idea of himself as a legendary figure" (*BGW* 62) reveals his self-deception as a kind of "semi-divine figure, at least in his own eyes," consistent with Frye's theory of the tragic hero. The impostor status of the character of Ned Merrill is foreshadowed in Cheever's journals, an example of Cheever's theory of fiction as a "mysterious union of fact and imagination" (Donaldson, *Conversations* 155). The narrator's description of Ned closely resembles Cheever's description of a man he observed at the Yaddo artists' colony during the time period that he was working on "The Swimmer":

He might have just come off a tennis court at that particular hour when the sun has drawn off the clay. Or he might be coming down the long dock at the yacht club with a sailbag over his shoulder. He hates tennis and yachting, he hates all competitive sports, and yet one of his lures is to represent an able-bodied youth, against a backdrop of green playing fields. He seems, in halflights [sic] to represent the pure impetuousness of youth, the first flush of manhood. He intends to be compared to a summer's day, particularly it's [sic] last hours and yet I think none of this. But is this an imposture, a performance, a set of lures rigged to stir the bones of someone who does not and may never have been drugged by the summery

light, someone like B who appears to have spent his life in dark rooms. It is I suppose a sport, a natural deception, the garden is full of them as anyone knows who has ever tried to weed a hedge. (Cheever, *Journals* 11.1.15)

Cheever's comparison of the man to the last hours of a summer's day matches the narrator's description of Ned: "He might be compared to a summer's day, particularly the last hours of one . . ." (*BGW* 62). Cheever's journal references to tennis, the sailbag over the man's shoulder "against a backdrop of green playing fields" also contain echoes of the narrator's description of Ned: ". . . and while he lacked a tennis racket or a sail bag the impression was definitely one of youth, sport, and clement weather" (*BGW* 62). At the same time, Cheever's positive impressions are combined with a suspicion that the man's demeanor, while pleasing, is merely "an imposture, a performance." A similar disparity exists between Ned's and the narrator's perspectives in the story's opening paragraphs. His metaphor comparing the man's artifice to a set of rigged lures is a clever continuation of waterborne images found in both "The Swimmer" and Cheever's journals.

Ned's self-proclaimed identity as "a legendary figure" has invited scholars to associate him with a number of legendary or heroic figures, including the hero of the Grail quest, the Biblical Adam, and Narcissus. As discussed in Chapter One, Blythe and Sweet have adopted several interpretations of the story centered on these legendary or heroic figures. At one point, however, Cheever appeared to dismiss the story's origins in the Narcissus myth:

I would like not to do the swimmer as narcissus. The possibility of a man's becoming infatuated with his own image is there, dramatized by a certain odor of abnormality but this is like picking out an unsound apple for celebration when the orchard is full of fine specimens. I've [sic] done it before; I would like to do better. Swimming is a pleasure, a gulping in of the summer afternoon, high spirits. It is in some ways natural that a man should love himself. . . . The swimmer might go through the seasons; I don't know but I know it is not Narcissus. (Cheever, *Journals* 11. 2. 22, 25)

Not surprisingly, scholars, including Blythe and Sweet, as noted in Chapter One, have observed obvious parallels between "The Swimmer" and Homer's *Odyssey* in their shared theme of the metaphorical journey. Metaphorical journeys usually have at their core the conception of the day's journey, the amount of space covered under the cycle of the sun (Frye, *Myth* 212). By extension, the day's journey becomes a concentrated metaphor for the whole of life as a cyclical process of birth, death, and renewed life (Frye, *Myth* 212). When the cyclical movement enters the individual life, the form of the journey is the quest, normally returning home, the great model for which is the *Odyssey* (Frye, *Myth* 213). The quest corresponds to the third phase of the summer mythos of romance (Frye, *Anatomy* 200). The quest is also the third phase of tragedy, in which strong emphasis is placed on the success or completeness of the hero's achievement (Frye, *Anatomy* 220).

This quest theme unites the *Odyssey* and "The Swimmer," despite their disparate fictional modes. Homer's *Odyssey* is a romance (Frye, *Anatomy* 319). "The Swimmer,"

on the other hand, displays Frye's tragic mythos of autumn, as discussed in Chapter Two. Cheever's use of Homer's epic to supply the fundamental plot pattern of "The Swimmer" cleverly disguises the story's tragic nature, at least initially. In addition, the juxtaposition of the "upward" movement of the *Odyssey* as a romance with the "downward" movement of "The Swimmer" as a tragedy, based on Frye's theory of monomyth dynamics, is the principal source of the dramatic irony of the ending of "The Swimmer."

As explained in Chapter One, Frye asserted that fictional modes may be classified by the hero's power of action, which may be greater or lesser than, or roughly the same as, the reader's (Frye, *Anatomy* 33). The hero of myth is a divine being who is superior in kind both to other men and to the environment of other men (Frye, *Anatomy* 33). The typical hero of romance is superior in degree to other men and to his environment and "moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended" (Frye, *Anatomy* 33). The hero of the high mimetic mode is superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment (Frye, *Anatomy* 33-4). He is a leader whose authority, passions, and powers of expression exceed ordinary men but remain subject to social criticism and to the order of nature (Frye, *Anatomy* 34). The hero of the low mimetic mode is superior neither to other men nor to his environment and is characterized by his common humanity (Frye, *Anatomy* 34). The ironic hero is inferior in power and intelligence, qualities which give the reader "the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity" (Frye, *Anatomy* 34).

Odysseus is an example of a typical hero of romance whose actions, according to Frye, "are marvelous but who himself is identified as a human being" even though he "moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended" (Frye,

*Anatomy* 33). For example, Odysseus finds himself continually blown off course because he has angered the god Poseidon.

Ned, on the other hand, is a hero of the low mimetic mode, a mode which Frye contends is associated with most comedy and realistic fiction (Frye, *Anatomy* 34). The hero of the low mimetic mode is superior neither to other men nor to his environment but instead is “one of us” (Frye, *Anatomy* 34). The low mimetic hero is distinguished from the ironic hero, who is “inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity” (Frye, *Anatomy* 34). According to Frye, the ironic hero does not necessarily have any tragic *harmartia* or pathetic obsession but is simply isolated from society (Frye, *Anatomy* 41). The central principle of tragic irony is that “whatever happens to the hero should be causally out of line with his character” (Frye, *Anatomy* 41). Thus, irony involves “the sense of arbitrariness, of the victim’s having been unlucky, selected at random or by lot, and no more deserving of what happens to him than anyone else would be” (Frye, *Anatomy* 41). Frye cites Herman Melville’s character of Billy Budd and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne as examples of the ironic hero (Frye, *Anatomy* 41).

Ned’s fate does not fit that of the ironic hero whose fate is “causally out of line with his character” (Frye, *Anatomy* 41). The reader senses that Ned’s fate is somehow deserved, that he not a victim except of his own poor decisions, even though the exact circumstances leading to his downfall are never explicitly revealed in the story. Scholars, however, have developed various theories to account for his decline. Blythe and Sweet contend that Ned’s immersion in multiple swimming pools signifies his desire to recapture his youth, just as the Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de Leon’s searched for the

fountain of youth, with whom Ned bears a kinship as “an explorer” (Blythe and Sweet, “Historical Allusion” 558). Blythe and Sweet also assert that the story catalogues the Ned’s inevitable decline because he is an alcoholic (Blythe and Sweet, “Alcoholism” (9). According to Blythe and Sweet, Ned’s alcoholism accounts for his memory lapses and time distortions (Blythe and Sweet, “Alcoholism” 10). It is also apparent from the text that Ned is an adulterer based on his past affair with Shirley Adams.

All of these potential flaws serve to humanize Ned and inspire sympathy on the part of the reader, consistent with Frye’s theory of the hero of low mimetic mode. Frye asserted that the “best word for low mimetic or domestic tragedy is . . . pathos,” which “presents its hero as isolated by a weakness which appeals to our sympathy because it is on our own level of experience” (Frye, *Anatomy* 38). Frye explained that the “root idea of pathos is the exclusion of an individual on our own level from a social group to which he is trying to belong” (Frye, *Anatomy* 39):

Hence the central tradition of sophisticated pathos is the study of the isolated mind, the story of how someone recognizably like ourselves is broken by a conflict between the inner and outer world, between imaginative reality and the sort of reality which is established by a social consensus. Such tragedy may be concerned . . . with a mania or obsession about rising in the world. . . . Or it may deal with the conflict of inner and outer life . . . or with the impact of inflexible morality on experience. . . . The type of character involved here we may call by the Greek word *alazon*, which means impostor, someone who pretends or tries to be something more than he is. (Frye, *Anatomy* 39)

Frye's description recalls the image of Ned Merrill, lounging by the Westerhazys' pool with "a vague and modest idea of himself as a legendary figure" (*BGW* 62).

Comparisons between Ned and the Homeric figure of Odysseus are inevitable due to their shared theme of homecoming by water. Ned's identification with Odysseus is first evoked by ship imagery to describe the view from the Westerhazys' pool. The massive cumulus cloud in the west, which will erupt into a thunderstorm later in the afternoon, is described "like a city seen from a distance—from the bow of an approaching ship" (*BGW* 61). Thus, the Westerhazys' pool is compared to the bow of a ship from which the cloud as city is distantly viewed. Ned's plan to swim home by water intensifies the correlation between Ned and Odysseus. Ned delights in his observation that a "string of swimming pools" forms a "quasi-subterranean stream" across the county by which he can swim home (*BGW* 62). He decides to name this "quasi-subterranean stream" the Lucinda River after his wife (*BGW* 62). Thus, the Lucinda River is an analogue for the Mediterranean Sea through which Odysseus perilously navigated in returning home to Ithaca from Troy.

Cheever creates a watery world in which Ned initially delights as he dives into the Westerhazys' pool, expressing "contempt for men who did not hurl themselves into pools" in a display of hubris (*BGW* 62). The noise of rushing water and fountains during the thunderstorm that erupts mid-way through his swim excites him: "Why did he love storms . . . why did the first watery notes of a storm wind have for him the unmistakable sound of good news, cheer, glad tidings?" (*BGW* 66). His affinity for water is also reflected in his disappointment when he finds that the Welchers' pool is dry: "This breach

in his chain of water disappointed him absurdly, and he felt like some explorer who seeks a torrential headwater and finds a dead stream” (*BGW* 67).

After being rejected by his former mistress, Ned is suddenly aware of the “autumnal fragrance” of flowers and of the winter constellations of Andromeda, Cepheus, and Cassiopeia, triggering thoughts about the passage of youth and lost time: “What had become of the constellations of midsummer? He began to cry” (*BGW* 75). Ned’s nostalgia recalls the homesickness of Odysseus on the island of the goddess Calypso, who “set out searching after the great-hearted Odysseus, and found him sitting on the seashore, and his eyes were never wiped dry of tears, and the sweet lifetime was draining out of him, as he wept for a way home . . .” (*Od.* 5.150-153). Listening to Demodokos’ song of the Trojan War from which he is returning, Odysseus mourns the past: “. . . and from under his eyes the tears ran down, drenching his cheeks. As a woman weeps, lying over the body of her dear husband, who fell fighting for her city . . . [s]uch were the pitiful tears Odysseus shed from under his brows . . .” (*Od.* 8. 522-4, 531-2).

The climactic reunion of Penelope and Odysseus is one of the key passages from the *Odyssey*, as found in Richmond Lattimore’s translation:

He wept as he held his lovely wife, whose thoughts were virtuous.  
And as when the land appears welcome to men who are swimming,  
after Poseidon has smashed their strong-built ship on the open  
water, pounding it with the weight of wind and the heavy  
seas, and only after a few escape the gray water landward  
by swimming, with a thick scurf of salt coated upon them,  
and gladly they set foot on the shore, escaping the evil;



so welcome was her husband to her as she looked upon him,  
and she could not let him go from the embrace of her white arms. (*Od.*  
23.232-40)

This epic simile is an example of a reverse simile characteristic of Homeric epic which suggests “both a sense of identity between people in different social and sexual roles and a loss of stability, an inversion of the normal” (Foley 60). Homer’s simile unites the *Odyssey*’s two parallel stories—Odysseus’ struggles to return home to Ithaca, frustrated by shipwreck and other calamities, and Penelope’s patient waiting at home amid rival suitors. Penelope’s emotions upon embracing the returned Odysseus are compared to a shipwrecked sailor’s joy in finally reaching land. Homer’s comparison is a brilliant masterstroke because it undermines the reader’s expectations, as explained by Anthony J. Podlecki:

The expected conclusion would have been ‘Just as a swimmer is glad to reach shore . . . so now was Odysseus glad to hold his wife’. But from Odysseus’ view point at the opening of the simile, for it is he who is weeping as he holds his wife, the poet suddenly and unexpectedly, but with consummate skill, changes . . . to Penelope’s reaction: ‘so glad was she to look upon her husband’. Quite breathtakingly, in one line, the usual has been avoided, the unusual substituted; our expectations have been suddenly and effectively belied, and most important of all, husband and wife are once more identified in a strikingly intimate way. It is as if Penelope had been the victim of long wandering and shipwreck, as if she

had been physically present with Odysseus in his travels as she surely was in spirit. (90)

The simile occurs at an important and unforgettable moment in the text. It marks the climax of the story—the recognition of Odysseus by Penelope (Coffey 130).

The simile's power lies in the relationship between its tenor, or primary subject, and its vehicle, the physical image that gives meaning to or clarifies the tenor. Like Podlecki, Helene P. Foley has observed that “[i]n the simile of the shipwrecked sailor Penelope takes on the mature Odysseus' experiences as her own” (69). The simile achieves this result because the vehicle of the simile in effect describes Odysseus, who is himself as shipwrecked sailor. Thus, by uniting the tenor of the simile, Penelope's joy, with its vehicle, a shipwrecked sailor analogous to Odysseus, the simile underscores the reunion of Penelope and Odysseus.

The artfulness of Homer's simile heightens the irony of Cheever's ending. Having already established parallels between his short story and the *Odyssey*, Cheever uses the stark contrast between the two endings to underscore the magnitude of Ned's loss. Unlike Odysseus, Ned returns home to an empty house, abandoned so long ago that the rust from the garage door handles rubs off onto his hands (*BGW* 76). Ned receives no welcome by a wife whose joy is that of “men who are swimming” upon sighting land and setting foot on the shore. Nor does Ned's reaction match their joyful response: “He had done what he wanted, he had swum the county, but he was so stupefied by exhaustion, that his triumph seemed vague. Stooped, holding onto the gateposts for support, he turned up the driveway of his own house” (*BGW* 76). As he approaches the house, he notices that “the force of the thunderstorm had knocked one of the rain gutters loose,”

causing it to hang down “over the front door like an umbrella bib” (*BGW* 76). Water, once the source of Ned’s delight as he contemplated his epic swim across the county, now acts as barrier, blocking the entry to his house. This image not only completes the story’s waterborne parallels with the *Odyssey* but also has archetypal significance, as will be discussed in Chapter Five.

The ironic relationship between the two endings intended by Cheever further suggests that Homer’s epic simile describing the reunion of Odysseus and Penelope may have provided Cheever with the title of his story. As Odysseus’ counterpart, Ned would be analogous to one of the “swimming men” of Homer’s reverse simile. Certainly Ned’s obsessive swimming is the story’s primary action, but rather than inducing joy, it induces his emotional and physical downfall: “He had swum too long, he had been immersed too long, and his nose and his throat were sore from the water” (*BGW* 75-6).

Stanley J. Kozikowski has observed that the story’s central image of swimming is evocative of a similar passage from Dante’s *Inferno*:

And as a swimmer, panting from the main  
Heaves safe to shore, then turns to face the drive  
Of perilous seas, and look, and looks again,  
So while my soul yet fled, did I contrive  
To turn and gaze on that dread pass once more  
Whence no man yet came ever out alive. (*Inf.* 1.22-27) (qtd in Bell  
368)

This passage from Dante plausibly supports Kozikowski’s interpretation of “The Swimmer” as a spiritual allegory in which Ned Merrill’s swimming journey through an

affluent neighborhood becomes “an uneasy pilgrimage in hell” akin to that described in the *Inferno* (367). Kozikowski’s argument, however, rests on a translation of the *Inferno* by Dorothy Leigh Sayers (374). It should be noted that other translations of the *Inferno* do not necessarily contain explicit references to “a swimmer.” For example, the same passage used by Kozikowski to support his theory has been translated by Allen Mandelbaum as follows:

And just as he who, with exhausted breath,  
having escaped from sea to shore, turns back  
to watch the dangerous waters he has quit,  
so did my spirit, still a fugitive,  
turn back to look intently at the pass  
that never has let any man survive. (*Inf.* 1.22-27)

The translation used by Cheever appears to be undocumented.

Furthermore, a Dante-centered interpretation comparing Ned’s experiences to those of Dante appears to assume a level of self-awareness by Ned that is countered by the text. The comparison also lacks the dramatic irony associated with a comparison based on Homer’s *Odyssey* which centers on the dissonance between the stories’ endings as a consequence of their different fictional modes, one romantic and the other tragic. By juxtaposing Ned’s homecoming against the backdrop of the *Odyssey*, Cheever has achieved a dramatic irony missing from other interpretations.

## CHAPTER V

### The Archetypal Imagery of “The Swimmer”

Archetypal images do not necessarily function as archetypes in every literary work in which they appear. Such images achieve archetypal meaning when the total context of the work logically supports an archetypal reading (Guerin 230). In “The Swimmer” Cheever uses archetypal imagery to express archetypal meaning in the context of the story’s tragic mythos of autumn. Such archetypal imagery includes Cheever’s use of color and number symbolism and the archetypal images of water, the river, and the house.

Lynne Waldeland has asserted that metamorphosis and transformation is a potential unifying theme of the stories collected in *The Brigadier and the Golf Widow*, the collection of short stories in which “The Swimmer” appeared (92). Certainly that theme fits “The Swimmer,” in which its main character, Ned Merrill, appears to undergo both physical and emotional transformation in the course of a Sunday afternoon. In exploring the theme of self-transformation, Cheever uses the archetype of the house to signify self and the concept of homelessness to signify absence or loss of identity.

The image of the house is an archetype for the repository of all wisdom and tradition itself (Cirlot 153). In dreams, the image of the house represents different layers of the psyche, with the outside signifying the outward appearance of Man, his personality or mask; the upper floors corresponding to the head and the mind, as well as the conscious exercise of self-control; and the basement corresponding to the unconscious and the instincts (Cirlot 153). Thus, Ned’s house symbolizes Ned’s psyche and the presence of wisdom and tradition in his life. That the house is locked signifies Ned’s

inability to access either, except on the basis of outward appearances. The exterior of the house represents Ned's personality or mask, the only part of the house to which Ned has access. The house's emptiness and family absence signify the absence of wisdom and tradition in Ned's life. The absence of wisdom and tradition is consistent with Ned's heavy drinking and his extra-marital affair with Shirley Adams. The house's emptiness also mirrors Ned's own emptiness and lack of self awareness.

The archetypal image of the house is closely related to the story's predominant images of water and the river. Water takes various forms in the story, including the water contained in swimming pools and the rain associated with the thunderstorm. Water symbolism has multiple meanings, including birth-death-resurrection, purification and redemption, and fertility and growth (Guerin 227). It is also a symbol for the unconscious (Guerin 227). Water symbolism is an expression of the vital potential of the psyche and of its struggles to formulate a clear message comprehensible to the conscious mind (Cirlot 366).

The river is represented by the series of sixteen swimming pools which Ned nicknames the Lucinda River. The image of the river has several associations such as death and rebirth, the flowing of time into eternity, the transitional phases of the life cycle, and incarnations of deities (Guerin 227). Cirlot suggests that the symbol is ambivalent because it can be interpreted to refer to the creative power both of nature and of time (274). Thus, it can symbolize both fertility and the irreversible passage of time and consequent sense of loss and oblivion (Cirlot 274). The series of sixteen swimming pools seems like a river to Ned but they lack the river's essential characteristics of continuity and flow. Their fragmented nature blocks increased awareness and insight.

Michael Ferber has observed literature's use of hydraulic metaphors to convey the unconscious (172). For example, Shelley's poem "Mont Blanc" likens the Ravine of Arve to "the everlasting universe of things" that "flows through the mind . . . where from secret springs / The source of human thought its tribute brings / Of waters . . ." (ll. 1-2, 4-6, qtd in Ferber 172). Ferber notes Shelley's punning on the word "tributary" to strengthen the metaphor (172). Ferber also notes the common use of the phases of a river from its source to its mouth to express ages in a human life, citing Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan" as one example: "The metaphor is implicit in the description of 'Alph the sacred river' . . . which rises from a fountain that seems to be in labor, meanders for a while, and then sinks into the 'lifeless ocean'" (172). Similarly, in *The Excursion*, Wordsworth observes that "[w]hoever hath stood to watch a mountain brook / In some small passage of its course . . . [s]uch a stream is human Life" (3.967-87, qtd in Ferber 172).

Much like Ferber's examples, Cheever unites the images of water and the river in "The Swimmer" to convey not only the passage of time but also its attendant losses which spring from the unconscious mind. During the course of his afternoon swim, Ned increasingly experiences a sense of loss, whether of youth, vitality, regard of others, standing in the community, fortune, or family, yet he is unable to grasp its meaning. Ned's bereft mental state is exemplified by the dark and empty house at the climax of his journey.

Cheever's archetypal use of color symbolism is equally effective in tracing the arc of Ned's decline. In cataloging Cheever's use of color in "The Swimmer," Nora C. Graves concludes that the dominant color in the story is one connected with water: the

color green with its variants of sapphire, cerulean, and gold (5). Although “The Swimmer” contains other color references, such as red and yellow to describe the changing colors of the foliage, Graves’ focus on the changing colors of the water in the swimming pool is appropriate given the central importance of the swimming pools to the story’s plot and the significance of water as an archetypal image in the story.

The description of the Westerhazys’ pool as “a pale shade of green” is the story’s first color reference: “The pool, fed by an artesian well with a high iron content, was a pale shade of green” (*BGW* 61). The literary manuscript which Cheever submitted to *The New Yorker* for publication described the color of the Westerhazys’ pool as a “fine shade of green” (*MS*, Series 1, Box 2, Folder 35). The manuscript, however, contains an edit in Cheever’s own handwriting, which shows that the word “fine” was stricken and replaced by the word “pale” (*MS*, Series 1, Box 2, Folder 35). This change is one of only two substantive changes Cheever made to the final manuscript. The other change was made to the story’s first paragraph to remove the Hallorans as the owners of the wildlife preserve mentioned in the story (*MS*, Series 1, Box 2, Folder 35). Cheever may have substituted the word “pale” to avoid duplication of the word “fine,” which appears in the next sentence stating, “It was a fine day” (*BGW* 61). However, the connotations of the two words “fine” and “pale” are distinctly different; therefore, it is more plausible that Cheever’s substitution represents a subtle but substantive shift in meaning. The tone of a color, i.e. its intensity or brightness, directly bears on its symbolic meaning (Cirlot 55).

Although the word “pale,” when used an adjective, can simply mean “lacking intensity of depth of color,” its first meaning, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, is “of a whitish or ashen appearance . . . typically connoting shock strong



emotion, or ill health.” This meaning, as well as the word’s figurative meaning, “feeble, weak, faint” and “lacking in intensity, vigour or robustness,” prefigures Ned’s growing fatigue and eventual physical and emotional decline.

Color symbolism is one of the most universal of all types of symbolism with many considerations bearing upon the meaning of color (Cirlot 52). Superficially, warm “advancing” colors (red, orange, yellow, and white) correspond to processes of assimilation, activity, and intensity (Cirlot 52). Cold “retreating” colors (blue, indigo, violet, and black) correspond to processes of dissimulation, passivity, and debilitation (Cirlot 52). Located in the middle of the chromatic range, the color green is an intermediate transitional color with varied meaning (Cirlot 52). On the one hand, it is positively associated with growth, sensation, hope, and fertility; yet the color is also associated with death and decay (Guerin 227). Green is associated with vegetation but also with death and lividness; therefore, it is the connecting link between black, associated with mineral life, and red, associated with blood and animal life, as well as between animal life and decomposition and death (Cirlot 53).

In “The Swimmer,” Cheever fully utilizes green’s capability of conveying multiple composite meanings. For example, Cheever’s use of the color at the beginning of the story to describe the Westerhazys’ pool connotes Ned’s emotional immaturity because of the color’s historical association with youthful exuberance and inconstancy. According to Michel Pastoureau, green was associated in the Middle Ages with feelings of love, particularly the fickleness and frivolity of youth, the impatience of the flesh, and inconstancy of heart (Pastoureau, *Green* 71). As Ned lounges beside the Westerhazys’ “pale green” pool, he is described as having “the especial slenderness of youth,”

conveying the impressions of “youth, sport, and clement weather” (*BGW* 62). Although Ned is a married man, earlier that morning, he “had slid down the banister . . . 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” (*BGW* 62).

The color’s evolving color history in the later Middle Ages amplifies its meaning in “The Swimmer.” According to Pastoureau, because of its chemical instability, green became associated “with all that was symbolically unstable: not only childhood and youth, love and beauty, but also luck, hope, fortune, destiny. By the same token, it appeared as an ambiguous, disturbing, and even dangerous color” (Pastoureau, *Green* 84). Because the color was difficult to produce and to fix, green tones on fabrics and clothing were often faded, drab and nonresistant to washing and to light (Pastoureau, *Green* 11). Although green’s color stability improved in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries due to better dyeing techniques, two different shades of green continued to be recognized: *vert gai* (gay green) for the shades that were pleasing because of newer dyeing techniques and *vert perdu* (lost green) for the shades that were displeasing because they were dyed using older methods (Pastoureau, *Green* 118). The “pale green” color of the Westerhazys’ pool suggests the paler *vert perdu*, aptly translated as “lost green.”

Green’s negative reputation as a “false color” that was “simultaneously appealing and disappointing,” at once associated with “all that was changing and ephemeral—youth, love, beauty, hope . . . and with all that was false, treacherous, and hypocritical” (Pastoureau, *Green* 118), captures the evolving nature of Ned’s pool-to-pool odyssey. Ned begins his swim with youthful delight and exuberance as he scampers

across the lawn: “His heart was high and he ran across the grass” (*BGW* 63). The story ends in disappointment and sorrow caused by the falsity of Ned’s existence: “It was probably the first time in [Ned’s] adult life that he had ever cried, certainly the first time in his life that he had ever felt so miserable, cold, tired, and bewildered” (*BGW* 75).

The color description of the Westerhazys’ swimming pool is one of four such color descriptions in the story. Except for the Hallorans’ pool, which is “opaque gold” because it is fed, unfiltered, by a brook (*BGW* 70), the water in the other pools is blue. The Bunkers’ pool is described as “sapphire-colored” (*BGW* 64). Shirley Adams’ pool contains “lighted cerulean” water (*BGW* 74). Like the color green, the symbolism of the color blue in “The Swimmer” is multi-dimensional, generally conveying Ned’s mounting decline and specifically his dependence on alcohol.

The color blue’s largely positive associations with truth, religious feeling, security, and spiritual purity are grounded in its use in the eleventh and twelfth centuries to depict images of the Virgin Mary (Pastoureau, *Blue* 49-50). Blue flourished during the Romantic period when it became the color of love, melancholy, and dreams (Pastoureau, *Blue* 140); however, these Romantic associations led to blue’s association with alcohol. The German phrase *blau sein*, meaning “to be drunk,” evokes the clouded mind and numbed senses of one who has drunk too much alcohol (Pastoureau, *Blue* 140). The English expression “the blue hour” denotes the end of the work day when persons spend an hour in a bar to drink and forget their troubles, instead of going directly home (Pastoureau, *Blue* 140). The color blue and alcohol were also linked in medieval times because numerous collections of dye recipes recommended the use of an extremely drunk

man's urine as a mordant to help woad (a dye) penetrate deeply into the fabric (Pastoureau, *Blue* 140).

An entry in Cheever's journals corresponding to the time period of the story's composition invokes a similar metaphor of "after dinner blues," in the context of other notes on "The Swimmer": "Swim in the cold water. Bask in the sun. A day of great beauty. But the after dinner blues set in" (Cheever, *Journals* 11.1.19). Cheever's journal reference to "a day of great beauty" recalls Ned's perception that "[t]he day was beautiful" and his plan to swim home as a way "to celebrate its beauty" (*BGW* 62). These impressions combined in a single journal entry imply Cheever's use of color archetypes as part of his creative process in writing "The Swimmer."

The separate symbolism and color histories of green and blue moderate Graves' contention that sapphire and cerulean blue are simply "variants" of the color green; however, the two colors share a relationship that is relevant to "The Swimmer." While blue's positive symbolism has developed over several centuries, its association with water and with the cold is more recent. In ancient and medieval societies, water was rarely seen or conceived of as blue (Pastoureau 181). Instead, water was most often associated with the color green. On the oldest maps of both sea and land, water was almost always green; it was only in the late fifteenth century that blue gained greater favor as the color of water (Pastoureau, *Blue* 181). The color blue's association with water led to its association with the cold (Pastoureau, *Blue* 181).

The archetypal significance of the color blue in "The Swimmer" has several layers. It is associated with the cold water of the swimming pools brought on by the changing seasons, and as such, traces Ned's decline during the course of the afternoon as

he experiences sensations of being cold along with growing fatigue. Blue's association with water generally evokes the story's Odyssean theme of returning home by water with Cheever's character of Ned Merrill as Odysseus' modern counterpart.

The color blue also denotes Ned's progressive use of alcohol symbolized by the changing color of the swimming pools. The initial "pale green" of the Westerhazys' pool becomes the sapphire-colored pool of the Bunkers' where Ned has a second gin and tonic (*BGW* 65). Although Shirley Adams refuses to make Ned a drink (*BGW* 75), the cerulean water of her pool denotes Ned's unrelenting use and dependence on alcohol throughout the afternoon. The murky water at the public pool, where no liquor is served, makes Ned remember "the sapphire water at the Bunkers' with longing" (*BGW* 69). After his confusing exchange with Mrs. Halloran, Ned's reaction reveals his dependence on alcohol:

He needed a drink. Whiskey would warm him, pick him up, carry him through the last of his journey, refresh his feeling that it was original and valorous to swim across the county. Channel swimmers took brandy. He needed a stimulant. . . . He crossed some fields to the Biswangers' and the sounds of revelry there. They would be honored to give him a drink, they would be happy to give him a drink, they would in fact be lucky to give him a drink. (*BGW* 71-3)

One of the story's most curious images and color references is the image of the red de Haviland training airplane circling overhead during Ned's swim. The image appears twice in the story. Ned sees the small plane for the first time at the Bunkers' pool:

Overhead a red de Haviland trainer was circling around and around and around in the sky with something like the glee of a child in a swing. Ned felt a passing affection for the scene, a tenderness for the gathering, as if it was something that he might touch. In the distance he heard thunder.

(*BGW* 64-5)

The image appears a second time at the Levys' when Ned hears "the percussiveness of thunder again" (*BGW* 66): "The de Haviland trainer was still circling overhead and it seemed to Ned that he could almost hear the pilot laugh with pleasure in the afternoon; but when there was another peal of thunder he took off for home" (*BGW* 66).

Like Cheever's description of Ned Merrill, the image of the red de Haviland trainer is an example of Cheever's "mysterious union of fact and imagination" (Donaldson, *Conversations* 155). One of Cheever's journal entries contains both a note to himself to "write the summer story" and a description of a "red Havermark Trainer" that echoes the passages from "The Swimmer" describing the plane (Cheever, *Journals* 11.1.5):

At around four a red Havermark Trainer flies over and the manoeuvring [sic] of the pilot who goes aimlessly up and down and around for an hour seem to convey his ecstasy in the fineness of this late summer afternoon. I seem almost to hear him laugh. He goes home to flying school at six.

(Cheever, *Journals* 11.1.5)

As a warm "advancing" color described by Cirlot, red is generally associated with activity and intensity (Cirlot 52). Red may also symbolize disorder (Guerin 227). In a

recent study of the color red, Amy Butler Greenfield has neatly summarized the color's history and multiple associations:

Although many mammals have trouble perceiving red, the human eye is strongly sensitized to the color. An affinity for red seems almost hard-wired into us. Perhaps this explains why, in language after language, the word for red is an ancient one, older than any other color save black and white. Before there was blue or yellow or green, there was red, the color of fire and blood. (2)

Greenfield observes that “[t]hroughout much of the world, red represents events and emotions at the core of the human condition: danger and courage, revolution and war, violence and sin, desire and passion, even life itself,” citing poems by Burns, Tennyson, and Dickinson as examples (2). As a color “at the core of the human condition,” red also provides a fitting color reference for “The Swimmer,” which investigates the human condition in the person of Ned Merrill.

The image of the red de Havilland trainer has complex meaning because it combines both visual and kinetic imagery. On the one hand, the de Havilland trainer is a playful image, as Ned compares its flight to “a child in a swing” (*BGW* 64). Yet its appearance is always accompanied by thunder, which has more menacing overtones. Thus, the redness of the plane may suggest disorder, which counters the playfulness of its flight. This color symbolism reflects Ned's increasing disorientation and the disorder associated with the mysterious changing of the seasons. The color symbolism also suggests Ned's passion, as evidenced by his enthusiastic desire to swim the county,

which is increasingly challenged by extraneous people and events such as the thunderstorm.

Although not focused on color symbolism, Blythe and Sweet's analysis of the image of the red de Haviland trainer would support this reading. They contend that the image symbolizes the endless repetition of youth, evoked by the image's continual circling "with the glee of a child in a swing" (Blythe and Sweet, "De Haviland" 7). Blythe and Sweet contend that the image's appearance at the approximate mid-point of the story emphasizes the inevitable destruction of youth, a reality that eludes Ned (Blythe and Sweet, "De Haviland" 7). They also believe that the image's association with thunder is significant because the juxtaposition of these auditory and visual images convey to the reader that "the storms of life inevitably destroy the idyllic days of childhood" (Blythe and Sweet, "De Haviland" 7-8). Blythe and Sweet's reading, which focuses on the transitory nature of youth, is consistent with the use of the color red to symbolize disorder.

Cheever's use of the color yellow and its related color gold is curious because even though each color appears only once in the story, both appearances are associated with Ned's encounter at the Hallorans' pool. As Ned crosses onto their property, he notices that "[t]heir beech hedge was yellow," which Ned attributes to blight "like the Levys' maple" (*BGW* 70). The color of the Hallorans' pool, which is fed by brook, is "the opaque gold of the stream" (*BGW* 70).

The color yellow's association with blight in the story suggests negative meaning, which is corroborated by yellow's color history. Although the color was appreciated in ancient Greece and Rome, it was devalued in the Middle Ages and



became the color of deceit and cowardice, then of felony and infamy (Pastoureau, *Colours* 87). In medieval literature, it was presented as the color of traitors; it is also the color assigned to excluded or rejected individuals such as Jews, heretics, lepers, and convicts, many of whom had to display defamatory badges and clothing insignia (Pastoureau, *Colours* 87). When associated or paired with the color green, yellow “became the color of disorder and madness” (Pastoureau, *Colours* 87). Yellow is also associated with sickness and even death (Pastoureau, *Colours* 88). Yellow’s pervasive negative associations have only recently been moderated by the ubiquitous yellow jersey associated with the Tour de France (Pastoureau, *Colours* 88).

Based on its sordid symbolism and color history, the yellow color of the Hallorans’ beech hedge carries multiple archetypal meanings. First, it conveys the social isolation of both Ned and the Hallorans’ who “seemed to bask in the suspicion that they might be Communists” (*BGW* 70). In addition, yellow’s association with deceit recalls Ned’s own self-deception, which is also evident at the Hallorans’ when he attributes the yellow color of their beech hedge to blight instead of the changing seasons. Finally, the pairing of yellow and green to convey disorder and madness appears especially significant because, as we have seen, the color green plays a prominent role in the story as its first color reference. Even though Cheever does not use green and yellow in the same paragraph, in the brief context of a short story (which Cheever labeled a “burst”), they should be considered as pairs, particularly since the story’s larger context supports this interpretation. At this point in the story, Ned has already begun to experience growing fatigue and memory loss. He is unable to remember the year that Mrs. Levy purchased the Japanese lanterns (*BGW* 67). Ned resembles “a victim of foul play” or “a

fool” as he tries to cross Route 424 (*BGW* 68). Moreover, it is during this episode at the Hallorans’ that Mrs. Halloran alludes to Ned’s “misfortune,” which he denies and is unable to recall (*BGW* 71). In addition, the disorder evoked by the pairing of yellow and green is consistent with the color symbolism of the red de Havilland trainer symbolizing the disordering of the seasons and Ned’s disordered mental condition. Cheever’s use of the color yellow to describe the beech hedge builds on this association.

The color gold, however, does not share yellow’s negative color symbolism. According to Pastoureau, “[t]o medieval minds, the only good yellow was the yellow of gold” (Pastoureau, *Colours* 87-88). In the path of spiritual ascension denoted by the colors black, white, red, and gold, the color gold represents the state of glory or a point of arrival (Cirlot 56). Thus, “the opaque gold” of the Hallorans’ pool, which corresponds to the unfiltered water of the brook which feeds it, appears to represent an alternative state of enlightenment in contrast to Ned’s self-deception. Unlike the concrete swimming pools which make up most of the Lucinda River imagined by Ned, the Hallorans’ pool is a flagstone pool, one of the oldest in the county (*BGW* 70). It is old like the elderly Hallorans’ (*BGW* 70). Consistent with her maturity and in contrast to Ned’s impulsiveness, Mrs. Halloran exhibits caution and skepticism about the feasibility of Ned’s cross-county swim: “‘Why, I didn’t know one could,’ exclaimed Mrs. Halloran” (*BGW* 71). The subject matter of her conversation with Ned, which focuses on the reality of Ned’s circumstances, similarly contrasts with Ned’s denial: “‘I don’t know what you mean’” (*BGW* 71).

“The Swimmer” also displays number symbolism having archetypal significance. Once remarking that he was “very fond of round numbers” (Donaldson, *Conversations*

58), Cheever consistently uses the number four or its multiples in “The Swimmer.” The multiplication of a number increases its power (Cirlot 236). The story is anchored by images of Ned’s four daughters. They are part of the narrator’s initial description of Ned: “His own house stood in Bullet Park, eight miles to the south, where his four beautiful daughters would have had their lunch and might be playing tennis” (*BGW* 62). When Ned finally returns home to find his house dark and abandoned house, Ned wonders where they have gone (*BGW* 76).

Cheever uses the number four or its variants to describe Ned’s progress at various points along his swimming route. The narrator describes the progress of Ned’s swim as “nearly half the length of the Lucinda River” (*BGW* 66) or “about four miles” when he reaches the Hallorans’ pool (*BGW* 71). In addition, the highway which Ned must cross to reach the public pool at the Recreation Center of the Village of Lancaster is named Route 424 (*BGW* 68). Multiples of the number four recur throughout the story. The total number of swimming pools in the story is sixteen, counting the Westerhazys’ pool from which Ned originates his swim: “He took off his sweater that was hung over his shoulders and dove in” (*BGW* 62). Ned’s home is located eight miles away in Bullet Park (*BGW* 62).

The number four is associated with the circle, the life cycle, the four seasons, the female principle, and the four elements (earth, air, fire, and water) (Guerin 228). According to Cirlot, the number four is symbolic of the earth and of terrestrial space and of the human situation (Cirlot 232). It is equated with the square and the cube, and the cross representing the four seasons and the points of the compass (Cirlot 232). In mystic thought the number four represents the tetramorphs illustrating the quaternary principle

linked with the concept of situation and the intuitive sense of spatial order (Cirlot 337). This pattern is completed by the number five: four plus the central point, sometimes denoted by a circle or almond-shaped mandorla; or else by the number seven: four outside and three inside (Cirlot 338).

Ned's four daughters constitute a tetramorph, which is completed by the fifth central point represented by Ned's wife, Lucinda. As such, the completed symbol represents the spatial order of Ned's home and family; the absence of the four daughters and Lucinda at the end of the story represents the disintegration of Ned's family. In addition, the number four's archetypal association with the four seasons accords with the story's mythic images of summer and autumn. The number's related association with the life cycle echoes Ned's apparent transformation from middle to old age with its loss of youth and vitality.

Building on the story's parallels with Homer's *Odyssey*, George W. Hunt contends that in crossing Route 424, Ned "tries to traverse the gap between Scylla and Charybdis" (281). Although Hunt's interpretation does not address the archetypal significance of numbers, such analysis reinforces Hunt's conclusion. As the first and third digit of the three-digit route number, the number four anchors the route number, with the second digit, the number 2, representing the median, quite literally. An old man slows down to allow Ned to "get to the middle of the road, where there was a grass divider. Here he was exposed to the ridicule of the northbound traffic, but after ten or fifteen minutes he was able to cross" (*BGW* 69).

Cheever skillfully uses archetypal imagery throughout "The Swimmer" to convey the story's principal theme of physical and emotional loss associated with Frye's tragic

mythos of autumn. The iconic archetypal images of water and the river convey not only the passage of time but also its inevitable losses. These archetypal images are forcefully and imaginatively combined with the climactic archetypal image of the house to underscore Ned's own psychic emptiness and lack of self-awareness, symbolized by the dark and empty house. The story's color and number symbolism complete the story's impressive architecture of archetypal images.

## CHAPTER VI

### Ned Merrill as Jung's *Puer Aeternus*

One of the most important Jungian archetypes is the archetype of the child, which expresses man's wholeness:

The "child" is all that is abandoned and exposed and at the same time divinely powerful; the insignificant, dubious beginning, and the triumphal end. The "eternal child" in man is an indescribable experience, an incongruity, a handicap, and a divine prerogative; an imponderable that determines the ultimate worth or worthlessness of a personality. (Jung, *Archetypes* 179)

As Jung indicates, the child archetype is an "imponderable" that can either elicit emotional maturity or, in its neurotic form, the "incongruity" and "handicap" of the "eternal child," also known as the *puer aeternus*. He is the man who never grew up, exemplified by Cheever's character of Ned Merrill in "The Swimmer." Trapped by his own self-deception, Ned's climactic return to a dark and empty house bereft of family portrays the ultimate "worthlessness" of the personality of the *puer aeternus*. Ned is Cheever's "forever boy" whose "summery smile collapses on a look on pain" (Cheever, *Journals* 11.1.17).

According to Jung, the higher and complete man, "begotten by the 'unknown' father and born from Wisdom . . . in the figure of the *puer aeternus* . . . represents our totality which transcends consciousness" (Jung, *Job* 95). He is "boy who is born from the maturity of the adult man, and not the unconscious child we would like to remain" (Jung, *Job* 95). Jung's description of the *puer aeternus* in this context of integrated

wholeness recalls Wordsworth's poem, "The Rainbow": "The child is father to the man." Quoting from one of Jung's letters, his colleague Marie-Louise von Franz writes that "[i]dentity with the *puer* signifies a psychological puerility that could do nothing better than outgrow itself. It always leads to external blows of fate which show the need for another attitude. But reason accomplishes nothing, because the *puer aeternus* is always an agent of destiny" (von Franz 6).

Von Franz's quotation adds new insight into Ned's description of himself as "a man of destiny" (BGW 63). Ned's "destiny" is a life of psychological adolescence instead of integrated wholeness. Having never outgrown the *puer*, Ned is destined to lead his life as a *puer aeternus*. From this Jungian perspective, "The Swimmer" resembles a clinical study of the "external blows of fate" which continually confront the *puer aeternus*.

The *puer aeternus* typically leads a provisional life, due to his fear of being caught in a situation from which it might not be possible to escape (Sharp 109). Plans for the future slip away in fantasies of what will be, what could be, while no decisive action is taken to change (Sharp 109-10). The *puer aeternus* covets independence and freedom, chafes at boundaries and limits, finding restrictions largely intolerable (Sharp 110). The term has also been used to describe men who have difficulty settling down and are idealistic, seemingly untouched by age, and given to flights of imagination (Samuels 126).

Ned's cross-county swim exemplifies a flight of imagination typical of the *puer aeternus*. Ned considers his scheme a "discovery, a contribution to modern geography" (BGW 62), revealing his grandiosity and misplaced idealism. The Lucinda River

imagined by Ned is not a river at all but a series of disconnected swimming pools as fragmented as the mind that viewed them as anything else. His plan to swim home via a “river” named after his wife is an idealization of his real need to be a responsible husband. The *puer aeternus*’ realization that he should adapt to reality is an intellectual idea which the *puer aeternus* fulfills in fantasy but not in reality (von Franz 41).

Another characteristic of the *puer aeternus* is his sense of “being something special” (von Franz 121). Ann Yeoman has characterized the *puer aeternus* as being “never quite in life. He hovers above it all in the realm of ideas and fantasy, feeling that life owes him a living because he is special” (19). Such observations are consistent with Ned’s “vague and modest idea of himself as a legendary figure” (*BGW* 62). Ned’s qualification of his legendary status as “vague and modest” is either an exercise in self-deception or an example of false modesty. His “inexplicable contempt for men who did not hurl themselves into pools” also reveals his feelings of superiority.

Dissociated from his feelings, the *puer aeternus* “protects himself from the possibility of abandonment, rejection, and disappointment with an array of defenses which prevent his fully committing himself to life in the first place” (Yeoman 18). As *puer aeternus*, Ned embarks on his adventure to swim across the county, leaving his wife, Lucinda, behind at the Westerhazys’ pool (*BGW* 63). When Lucinda understandably asks where he is going, Ned curtly responds that he is “going to swim home,” offering no details or further explanation, in a sense abandoning her as he will himself be abandoned at the end of the story (*BGW* 63).

Ned’s juvenile orientation characteristic of the *puer aeternus* unambiguously surfaces at various moments in the text. Even though he is “far from young,” Ned slides



down the banister and punctuates his childish behavior with a smack on the backside of a bronze statue of Aphrodite in the hallway of his house (*BGW* 62). Similarly, in a gesture of psychological projection, Ned compares the circling motion of the de Haviland trainer overhead to “the glee of a child in a swing” (*BGW* 64). Later, in an imaginative flight of fancy, Ned believes that he can “almost hear the pilot laugh” (*BGW* 66).

Ned’s attraction to flying, exemplified by his obsession with the red de Haviland trainer, is characteristic of the *puer aeternus*:

The one situation dreaded throughout by this type of man is to be bound to anything whatsoever. There is a terrific fear of being pinned down, of entering space and time completely, and of being the specific human being that one is. There is always the fear of being caught in a situation from which it may be impossible to slip out. . . . At the same time, there is something highly symbolic—namely a fascination for dangerous sports, particularly flying and mountaineering—so as to get as high as possible, the symbolism of which is to get away from the mother; i.e., from the earth, from ordinary life. (von Franz 2-3)

Ned’s extravagant cross-county swim could also be viewed in this context as a means which he has devised to escape ordinary life. Of course, the irony is that his life is ultimately inescapable, as persons along the route confront him with reality and the factual details of his existence, such as the loss of his house and his financial collapse.

Ned’s emotional immaturity as a *puer aeternus* is revealed by the growing dissonance between Ned and others along his route. Ned’s cross-county swim is, in effect, a series of trespasses onto private property (with the exception of the public pool

and even there he lacks the proper identification) so that he can complete his grandiose plan of swimming across the county to reach his house. Grace Biswanger, therefore, not unreasonably labels him a “gatecrasher” (*BGW* 73). Mrs. Halloran expresses understandable surprise that “one could” even accomplish such a feat (*BGW* 71). These disdainful responses climax in Shirley Adams’ exclamation: “‘Good Christ. Will you ever grow up?’” (*BGW* 75).

The disjunction between Ned’s self-perception and others’ perceptions is further shown by how he is addressed in the story. Whenever Ned is addressed by others along the route, he is never referred to as “Ned” but rather, by the diminutive, “Neddy,” suggesting that others recognize Ned’s emotional immaturity. Ned even refers to himself as “Neddy” in expressing satisfaction with his progress in reaching the halfway mark of his journey: “This was the day that Neddy Merrill swam across the county. That was the day!” (*BGW* 68). Significantly, the narrator refers to him as “Neddy Merrill” in introducing his character to the reader: “Neddy Merrill sat by the green water, one hand in it, one around a glass of gin” (*BGW* 61-62). Blythe and Sweet have also suggested that the diminutive “Neddy” suggests that Ned is a Peter Pan figure who refuses to grow up (Blythe and Sweet, “Ironic Return,” 8). Rather than analyzing Ned as *puer aeternus*, however, Blythe and Sweet contend that Ned’s behavior is a function of his unconscious desire to return to a womb-like state, thereby preserving his youth against the ravages of time (Blythe and Sweet, “Ironic Return” 8).

Ned’s attachment to the bronze statue of Aphrodite in his hallway symbolizes his status as a *puer aeternus* based on similarities between the story and the myth of Aphrodite and Adonis. Loved by both Aphrodite and Persephone, Adonis was ordered

by Zeus to spend half the year with each, the autumn and winter with Persephone in the Underworld, and the spring and summer with Aphrodite (Hamilton 118-19). When Adonis was killed by a wild boar, Aphrodite was left to mourn him (Hamilton 119). Adonis is considered an example of the *puer aeternus*, and Aphrodite an example of the archetypal mother figure (Segal 109-10).

These mythic themes are present in “The Swimmer,” serving to unmask Ned as a *puer aeternus*. The story’s summertime setting recalls the spring-summer time frame in which Adonis was ordered to live with Aphrodite. Like Adonis, Ned “lives” with Aphrodite in the sense that he has a statue of the goddess in his hallway. In addition, Ned’s former mistress, Shirley Adams, may be compared to Aphrodite. The statue of Aphrodite in Ned’s hallway is made of bronze (*BGW* 62). Shirley Adams’s hair is “the color of brass” (*BGW* 74). Although we now distinguish brass, an alloy of copper and zinc, from bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, the terms were often used interchangeably (Ferber 27).

This symbolism points up Ned’s decline during the course of the story. In a flashback we learn that before attending the Westerhazys’ party, Ned had playfully slid down the banister at his house and smacked the statue of Aphrodite on the backside located in his hallway (*BGW* 62). This playful, carefree attitude is gone by the time Ned reaches Shirley Adams’ pool as the story nears its conclusion. Insulted by Grace Biswanger and her bartender, Ned hopes he will be “cured” of these injuries at Shirley Adams’ pool: “Love—sexual roughhouse in fact—was the supreme elixir, the painkiller that would put the spring back into his step, the joy of life in his heart” (*BGW* 74). Ned foolishly perceives sexual roughhouse as the answer to all his problems, as “the supreme

elixir, the painkiller” that will banish his troubles and restore the spring in his step and the joy in his heart. He clearly experiences the disappointments attending life as a *puer aeternus* but lacks the capacity to act positively to change his direction.

Personal and professional failures are characteristic of the *puer aeternus* because of his unhealthy naiveté and idealism. Von Franz asserts that the *puer aeternus* “automatically attracts people who will deceive and cheat such a man” (von Franz 37):

I have often noticed in analyzing men of that kind how they, in a fatal way, are attracted to rather dubious women or pick up friends about whom one does not have a good feeling. It is as though their inexperienced naiveté and their wrong kind of idealism automatically call forth the opposite, and it is no use warning such people against such relationships.

(von Franz 37)

The unwillingness of the *puer aeternus* to outgrow his childish naiveté and idealism conforms to Joseph Campbell’s theory of the refusal of the call. According to Campbell, the mythological hero is called to the threshold of adventure where he encounters a shadow presence that guards his passage (245). Journeying through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, the mythological hero undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward, which is intrinsically an expansion of consciousness (246). The mythological hero then returns to the world, leaving behind his transcendental powers but having provided a boon which has restored the world (246). However, Campbell’s theory allows for the refusal of the call, which “converts the adventure into its negative” (59):

Walled in boredom, hard work, or “culture,” the subject loses the power of significant affirmative action and becomes a victim to be saved. His flowering world becomes a wasteland of dry stones and his life feels meaningless—even though, like King Minos, he may through titanic effort succeed in building an empire of renown. Whatever house he builds, it will be a house of death: a labyrinth of cyclopean walls to hide from his Minotaur. All he can do is create new problems for himself and await the gradual approach of his disintegration. (59)

Under Campbell’s mythological model, Ned has refused the call, which, in the case of a *puer aeternus*, is simply to grow up. What starts out as a glorious adventure to swim across the county ends in exhaustion and little else. Although Ned technically completes his cross-county swim, it has not “enlarged” the beauty of the day, as he had hoped at the start (*BGW* 62), nor, more importantly, has it enlarged his own consciousness. Ned is “so stupefied with exhaustion that his triumph seemed vague” (*BGW* 76). Once derisive of persons who did not dive into pools or had to use ladders (*BGW* 62-63), Ned is so weak at the last pool that he must use the steps to enter the icy water and then can only swim a “hobbled side stroke that he learned as a youth” (*BGW* 76). Refusing to outgrow the strategies “learned as a youth,” Ned must hold onto the gateposts for support, as his “stooped” frame limps up the driveway to his house (*BGW* 76). The locked house, emptied of family, that he finds at the end of the driveway signifies Ned’s failure to expand his consciousness and accept adult responsibility. His status as a *puer aeternus* is unchanged, despite the unsettling confusion and rejection

which he repeatedly experiences during his swim, because he is unwilling to accept the call to change, the call to grow up.

As Jung observed, the *puer* is “an imponderable that determines the ultimate worth or worthlessness of a personality” (Jung, *Archetypes* 179). Ned’s “worthlessness” is symbolized by the dark and empty house to which he returns, bewildered, at the end of “The Swimmer.” Exemplifying Cheever’s theory of the short story as an “intense encounter” about which the reader often does not know the beginning or the end (Donaldson, *Conversations* 45), the story, through its narrator, does not reveal Ned’s ultimate fate, as it leaves Ned, all alone, peering into the windows of his deserted house. Nevertheless, the reader knows that Ned’s fate will not be a happy one. It has been latent in the text all along: we know that “Ned” is an anagram of “end.”

## CHAPTER VII

### Conclusion

“The Swimmer” is one of John Cheever’s most enigmatic works of fiction. The story has been the subject of numerous interpretations since its publication in 1964; however, it is especially well-suited to archetypal literary criticism, a critical approach that is consistent with Cheever’s own artistic theory of fiction as a “mysterious union of fact and imagination.” An example of Frye’s mythos of autumn, or tragedy, “The Swimmer” traces the emotional and physical decline of its main character, Ned Merrill, invoking seasonal imagery consistent with Frye’s theory of the monomyth to underscore the story’s downward-shifting mythos from summertime romance to autumn tragedy.

The character of Ned Merrill exemplifies Frye’s theory of the tragic hero of the low mimetic mode who is “one of us” but has somehow been broken by life. Ned is essentially an impostor who pretends or tries to be something more than he is, as exemplified by the grandiosity of his plan to swim home through a sequential series of sixteen pools. Ned vaguely conceives of himself as a “legendary figure”; however, his own self-perception does not match the reality of his life, involving loss of family and fortune, which is gradually revealed during the course of his swim. The story’s parallels with Homer’s *Odyssey* underscore the magnitude of Ned’s loss. Unlike Odysseus, who returns home to a faithful Penelope, Ned returns home to find an abandoned house emptied of family. The ironic relationship between the two endings further suggests that Homer’s epic simile describing the reunion of Penelope and Odysseus may have provided Cheever with the title of his story; as Odysseus’ counterpart, Ned would be analogous to one of the “swimming men” described in Homer’s simile: “And as when the land appears

welcome to men who are swimming . . . so welcome was her husband to her as she looked upon him . . .” (*Od.* 23.233, 239).

The archetypal nature of the story’s imagery affirms its archetypal significance. Ned’s empty house mirrors Ned’s own emptiness and lack of self-awareness. This archetypal image is closely associated with the story’s primary water image of the swimming pool, which conveys not only the passage of time but also its attendant losses which spring from the unconscious mind. Cheever uses color symbolism, such as the changing colors of the various swimming pools, to underline Ned’s emotional and physical decline, conveying his emotional immaturity and dependence on alcohol. Cheever’s symbolic use of the number four or its multiples evokes the four seasons of Frye’s monomyth and also reinforces the notion of the disintegration of Ned’s family, which can be visualized as a tetramorph consisting of Ned’s four daughters and his wife, Lucinda, as the central point.

Ned’s degeneration may also be understood through an analysis of his character as an example of Jung’s archetypal figure of the *puer aeternus*, the eternal child. Ned is the man who never grew up, Cheever’s “forever boy,” described in his journals, whose “summery smile collapses on a look of pain” (Cheever, *Journals* 11.1.17). In a manner fully consistent with Frye’s theory of the monomyth, Cheever’s journal description deftly summarizes Ned’s transition from seeming romantic hero of “legendary” status, cloaked in self-denial beside the Westerhazys’ swimming pool, to the “collapsed” tragic figure pounding on the door of his locked and deserted house. Such description also affirms Updike’s observation after Cheever’s death that Cheever single-handedly made suburbia



an archetypal place, one eminently recognizable “wherever we are, or have been”  
(Updike, *New Yorker* 27).

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