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Performing the Suburban Ideal: Gendered Alienation in John Cheever's "The Enormous Radio", "The Country Husband", and "The Swimmer"

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Abstract

Nicknamed the "Chekhov of the Suburbs" (Doots, 1), John Cheever is an American author renowned for his masterful portrayal of post-World War II suburban life. In stories like "The Swimmer" (1964), Cheever explores the darker undercurrents of American suburbia through apparently simple storylines such as a man's whimsical journey through his neighbours' pools. However, beneath the polished surface of his works lies a world of quiet despair, personal delusion, and societal alienation.

Although scholars have explored Cheever's depiction of mid-twentieth-century American suburbia (Shivani, 2008) and the alienation of the modern man in his narratives (Collins, 1982), the specific role of gender in shaping this alienation remains under-researched. Focusing specifically on "The Enormous Radio" (1947), "The Country Husband" (1954), and "The Swimmer" (1964), I aim to bridge this gap by examining how strict gender norms play a significant role in the alienation of Cheever's suburban characters. Through close readings of these three selected short stories, supported by Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, I will argue that feelings of alienation in Cheever's stories are, in fact, not only a by-product of strict gender roles, but also a deeply gendered experience itself that affects male and female characters differently.

This research is divided into three main sections, each of them corresponding to one of the selected stories. Arranged chronologically, each part will provide a close reading of the text focusing on three themes: suburbia, femininity, and masculinity. Within each section, I will first discuss Cheever's suburbs as a site of gendered alienation, examining the strict demands of the suburban ideal and its evolution to reveal an environment that becomes a mechanism of estrangement, enforcing conformity through routine, appearance, and emotional suppression. Then, I will focus on Cheever's female characters, such as Irene Westcott, whose alienation arises not from public failure, but from domestic entrapment and the expectation of embodying emotional and moral stability. Finally, I will explore how male characters, such as Neddy Merrill or Francis Weed, experience a crisis when the suburban male ideal of the successful, emotionally contained man becomes unsustainable, resulting in self-destructive behaviour, detachment, or even delusion. By analysing how gender norms operate differently across these three narratives, this TFG aims to demonstrate that Cheever's suburbia produces a gendered environment of estrangement, where men and women suffer different but equally profound forms of alienation.

Keywords: alienation, gender performativity, John Cheever, "The Country Husband", "The Enormous Radio", "The Swimmer".

0. Introduction

Known as “the Chekhov of the suburbs” (Dootsi, 1), John Cheever occupies a unique space in mid-twentieth-century American literature. His fiction, steeped in quiet desperation and moral ambivalence, has long captivated scholars for his literary exploration of American suburbia; often presented as a place where happiness is promised but rarely attained. His characters—predominantly middle-class, white married couples in search of the American dream—seek to find meaning by embodying the hegemonic principles and ideals of mid-century society. However, more often than not, the performance of this role entails a brutal repression of true identity and real concerns and desires that ultimately leads Cheever’s characters to “drown in their matrimonial abyss” (Dootsi, 1).

Although critics have already acknowledged Cheever’s “wry moral censure of the banal suburban existence” (Shivani, 124-125), and his focus on “the increasing alienation of modern man” (Collins, 2), the gendered dimension of these issues have received less attention. Using Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity as a theoretical framework, this TFG analyzes three of Cheever’s short stories: “The Enormous Radio”, “The Country Husband”, and “The Swimmer”. By doing so, it aims to demonstrate how strict suburban gender norms are central to the operation and effects of alienation in Cheever’s stories.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that gender is not something we are born with but something that is constructed through repeated social practices. After discussing different feminist approaches and attempts to define the term, Butler concludes that gender is not an innate property, but rather a “cultural meaning that the sexed body assumes” (Butler, 9). That is, gender is produced through performative acts within a specific context and that cannot be separated from the other structures that

intersect with and shape identity such as race, class, ethnicity, and region (Butler, 4). This TFG thus begins with the premise that gender is a set of expectations performed within a specific cultural matrix. So in order to understand how gender is involved in the alienation experienced by John Cheever's characters, it is necessary to examine the ideologies and circumstances that define gender roles in the mid-twentieth-century suburban America Cheever writes about.

The suburban landscape portrayed in Cheever's stories could be described as a mainly white, middle-class, heteronormative, and patriarchal environment which reflects specific social expectations about class, race, gender, and family life. As Kim England puts it, the suburbs were designed "based on patriarchal and heterosexist assumptions about 'appropriate' gender roles and subsequent social practices" (25). Moreover, this physical space was not only built on the basis of these principles, but also contributed to their implementation and reinforcement, as "the location of residential areas, workplaces, and transportation networks and the overall layout of cities reflected a patriarchal capitalist society's expectations of what types of activities took place where, when, and by whom." (England, 24)

Post-war suburbanization was therefore structured around two clearly divided spheres: "The 'private' sphere of consumption/reproduction, home, family, and domesticity being the domain of women, and the 'public' sphere of production, waged work, and political activity being associated with men." (England, 25) As previously mentioned, this spatial separation of roles was further reinforced by suburban infrastructure itself. Suburban homes were built farther from urban job centers, lengthening men's commutes and deepening the domestic isolation of women, especially in single-car households (England, 26). Within this context, men were

expected to function as emotionally restrained breadwinners, while women were to embody the ideals of motherhood, morality, and emotional stability.

However, this longed-for domestic ideal was anything but stable. Suburban women were often cast as "all-purpose, high-value, low-cost housewives", expected to maintain a private, orderly household that served as a "safe haven for the emotional well-being of their family" (England, 26). The psychological toll of this role was immense. Many women "felt trapped in their home and neighborhood" as their lives were marked by "boredom and isolation" (England, 33), despite having been made to believe throughout their lives that marriage and motherhood were their ultimate goals.

Men also suffered under the pressures of strict post-war gender norms that emerged from what some scholars refer to as a "male panic" (Gilbert, 2)—a term that denotes a "time when men self-consciously rebel against real or imagined 'feminization' developing within the workplace, [or] public sphere" which had arisen during the war. At the same time, the booming post-war economy "accentuated breadwinning" (LaRossa, 243) and "a 'hard' or more forceful image of fatherhood was elevated in importance" (LaRossa, 25). Both the "traditionalization of fatherhood" (LaRossa, 19) and the rigid masculine ideal of the time demanded control, success, and emotional repression—expectations which may have distanced men from their own desires and inner lives. As a result, many became "quite quick-tempered, often dismissive of other people's feelings" (Precup, 36), symptoms of an unresolved struggle to conform to the demanding standards of masculinity in post-war America.

In order to show how Cheever's fiction unfolds within this context of socially constructed gender roles, I have structured this TFG in three main sections, each devoted to the close analysis of one of the selected stories. The selected texts are arranged chronologically, allowing for a nuanced exploration of the evolving depiction

of suburban life and its relationship to gendered experience across Cheever's work. Each of these three close readings will focus on the three themes that are crucial for this study: suburbia, femininity, and masculinity. Each analysis begins by examining Cheever's suburbia as a gendered space and an alienating system that enforces unattainable ideals and represses individuality through routine, appearances, conformity, and emotional suppression. The second focus turns to Cheever's female characters, like Irene Westcott in "The Enormous Radio", whose alienation stems from domestic confinement and the burden of emotional labor. Finally, each section explores how Cheever's male protagonists, like Neddy Merrill in "The Swimmer" or Francis Weed in "The Country Husband", struggle as well under the pressure of an unsustainable masculine ideal. Through this lens, this TFG attempts to demonstrate that the alienation in Cheever's suburbia is not only produced by rigid gender norms but is also a deeply gendered experience itself.

1. "The Enormous Radio"

1.1. The Pre-suburban Ideal and Post-war Values

Although "The Enormous Radio" is set in an apartment building near Sutton Place in midtown Manhattan rather than a suburban residential area, its protagonists, the Westcotts, reflect the ideals and gender norms that would become the dominant themes of John Cheever's suburban fiction. This short story first appeared in *The New Yorker* on May 17, 1947, and it perfectly captures the tensions of the post-World War II era in the United States. "The Enormous Radio" is set in a time when Americans were facing a changing social landscape and the pressures of adapting to a new, more homogenised culture (Stilley, 1). For that reason, even if the Westcotts do not live in a suburban

neighborhood, the social dynamics of their environment preview what will consolidate—in the following decade—as American suburban society. Jim and Irene's apartment block functions, in this way, as a kind of pre-suburban microcosm. In the building where "The Enormous Radio" takes place, white middle-class families live quiet, superficially content lives, marked by the lack of identity and a mutual silence about private suffering, which indicates that the values of middle-class conformity and appearances were already firmly in place. This short story therefore anticipates the transition to suburbia that would be explored in more detail in Cheever's later stories such as "The Country Husband" and "The Swimmer". The opening description of the Westcotts portrays them as the embodiment of mid-century family values:

> Jim and Irene Westcott were the kind of people who seem to strike that satisfactory average of income endeavor and respectability that is researched by the statistical reports in college alumni bulletins. They were the parents of two young children. They had been married nine years, they lived on the twelfth floor of an apartment house near Sutton Place, they went to the theater on an average of 10.3 times a year and they hoped someday to live in Westchester. (…) The Westcotts differed from their friends, their classmates, and their neighbors only in an interest they shared in serious music. They went to a great many concerts—although they seldom mentioned this to anyone—and they spent a good deal of time listening to music on the radio. (Cheever, 33)

The Westcotts are described as a family whose nature is rather performative and even statistical; people that "seem to strike that satisfactory average of income, endeavor, and respectability"—neither more nor less. This fragment suggests that Jim and Irene carefully ensure they live a life that conforms to societal expectations, particularly those outlined in "college alumni bulletins," a symbol of institutionalized ideals. They are the perfect image of the prototypical American family of the time, to the point that the only element that distinguishes them from their fellow neighbours is the fact that they go to concerts. However, they are so dedicated to sticking to the norm that they "seldom mention this to anyone," which suggests that Jim and Irene are completely and constantly aware of their appearance and they consciously craft it in order to conform to

their neighbourhood community. Living in the cultural heart of New York—with jazz clubs and concert halls such as Carnegie Hall just a few blocks away—their choice to be private about or even repress their interests reflects a deep fear of standing out. In a city that thrives on individuality, the Westcotts reflect how certain ideals of conformity and restraint had already permeated urban life. Their personal tastes and individuality are kept private, almost shamefully, in order to maintain the illusion of coherence and normalcy.

This idea of perfect alignment with what would become core suburban values is further emphasized by Jim and Irene's dream of one day moving to Westchester, a wealthy suburb of New York, where most of Cheever's fiction is set (including "The Country Husband" and "The Swimmer") (Lee, 339). This dream reflects a broader post-war trend in American middle-class society, for which the suburbs came to represent security, prosperity, and the fulfillment of the so-called "American Dream" (Shivani, 123). The suburbs meant much more than living away from the crowded and heterogenous city; it was a matter of identity. For families like the Westcotts, dreaming of Westchester was less about a desire for bigger houses and quieter neighbourhoods, and more about belonging to a cultural script—with rigid, unalterable gender roles—that defined and promised the ideal family life. This aspiration, however, demanded the concealment of the very things that make people themselves—such as an interest in "serious music"—in order to fully assimilate a lifestyle that supposedly guaranteed happiness and stability.

It is within this context of conformity and suppression that the element of enormous radio gains symbolic importance. The object that gives name to the short story—while originally an expression of the couple's interest in music—becomes an expression of concealment and the failed pursuit of happiness. In a surreal twist, when

the old radio breaks Jim buys his wife a new one. However, what Irene hears is not music but the private conversations of her neighbours. What at first appears to be a technical malfunction soon takes on symbolic weight, exposing the reality that lurks beneath the polished façade of suburban respectability. In the end, the radio is repaired "but it is too late for the Westcotts whose new insight into the pain, hypocrisy and squalor of other people's lives has revealed a similar rottenness in their own" (Lee, 330-331). Behind closed doors, things like infidelity, violence, and desperation, rather than anomalies, seem to be the norm; revealing how the suburban dream, instead of protecting individuals from chaos, simply displaces it into the private realm. Thus, through these revelations, the boundaries between public appearance and private truth begin to collapse. The radio therefore represents an intrusive presence of reality in a space designed to suppress it; and its effects on characters such as Irene Westcott object serve to reveal the psychological burden imposed by a lifestyle that demands the suppression of individuality and the perfect execution of normalcy.

1.2. Domestic Entrapment and Psychological Unraveling

The opening description of the Westcotts goes on to talk about Irene, the mother of the two children and Jim's wife. She is described as a "pleasant, rather plain girl" (Cheever, 33) who is firmly positioned within the traditional female sphere of domesticity and emotional caretaking, as her identity is shaped by her role as wife, mother, and homemaker. As Judith Butler puts it in *Gender Trouble* "the 'unity' of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform" (43), that is, gender roles are established through a constant repetition of specific gendered practices (Butler, 144). In the case of women in post-war America, these repetitive practices that

defined them as women were related to the "private sphere", as England names it (25). In other words, their domain was that of domesticity and their role as women was to ensure the emotional well-being of their children and husband, and a good functioning of the household. This preoccupation with the house can be seen, for example, in the huge pride Irene takes in her carefully curated living room—selected "as carefully as she chose her clothes" (Cheever, 34)—which reflects the gendered expectation that a woman's value lies in her ability to create a tasteful and comforting home. Her immediate reaction to the new radio as "an aggressive intruder" (Cheever, 34) underscores how any disruption to this carefully crafted aesthetic is perceived as a threat to her feminine domain. Throughout the story, Irene Westcott also moves through a series of repetitive nurturing tasks that establish her identity as a woman. She takes her children to the park, gets her son a glass of water in the middle of the night, braids her daughter's hair, cooks breakfast for the whole family, and sees off her husband and children every single morning. These actions establish her as the emotional anchor of the household responsible for holding everything together with calmness and grace. Even when disturbed by the unsettling voices that come from the radio, she repeatedly returns to her marital and maternal duties; she comes back again to what England would call her "proper place within the private sphere of the home" (26), retreating to the nursery with her children or focusing on her routinary chores. In "The Enormous Radio", this gendered expectation, which constantly disables Irene's autonomy, becomes thus the basis that contributes to her growing sense of alienation when her feelings and concerns are no longer in line with what is expected of her as a woman. This alienation is thus a product of the stifling performance that her role as a woman and wife demands in mid-century white, middle-class America.

Irene Westcott, as described by Barbora Vlachová, is "an ordinary housewife, not going to work, but solely staying at home, taking care of the children and the household" (16). With Jim working and her children at school, she spends most part of the day on her own, trapped within the four walls that define not only her role as a woman, but her entire identity. This sense of entrapment systematically isolates her from the outside world. That is why when confronted with the faulty radio she is taken out of her monotonous routine and becomes addicted, as she is involved—for once in her life—in something external to the private domain of her own house. Her newfound excitement and curiosity, however, soon turn into torment and despair; but still, she is supposed to exemplify the traditional post-war suburban housewife and behave in accordance with the "net of social conventions, expectations and beliefs" of the time (Vlachová, 6). Due to this discerning between the expectations put on Irene and her increasing anxiety and distress, the character experiences a certain alienation that grows and unfolds in stages throughout the short story, finally manifesting in an episode of crisis.

At first, these feelings of isolation are rather subtle and surface through signs of suspicions about the people around her. She stares at the women in the elevator and wonders who among them might be financially ruined or morally compromised; as the more she listens to the radio, the more she becomes fixated on the hidden, private lives of her neighbours:

> Irene had two Martinis at lunch, and she looked searchingly at her friend and wondered what her secrets were. They had intended to go shopping after lunch, but Irene excused herself and went home. She told the maid that she was not to be disturbed; then she went into the living room, closed the doors, and switched on the radio. She heard, in the course of the afternoon, the halting conversation of a woman entertaining her aunt, the hysterical conclusion of a luncheon party, and hostess briefing her maid about some cocktail guests. "Don't give the best Scotch to anyone who hasn't white hair," the hostess said. "See if you can get rid of the liver paste before you pass those hot things, and could you lend me five dollars? I want to tip the elevator man." (Cheever, 38)

As seen in the fragment at hand, Irene starts to feel alienated, not only from her neighbours, but also from her own friend she is having lunch with. Her discomfort is marked by a growing dependence on alcohol and an obsessive need to be alone with the radio. Her decision to have "two Martinis at lunch" and suddenly leave her friend to return to the radio shows her rising anxiety and detachment from the real world and the people around her. Instead of seeking connection, she becomes suspicious wondering what the secrets of her friends and neighbours might be. She projects all the private and troubling conversations she hears through the radio onto everyone she meets or runs into; which further isolates her from her community. Her behavior is not only suspicious but also compulsive, as can be seen in her insistence on turning on the radio and her demands "not to be disturbed". There is a clear disconnect between her life and the hidden turmoil she begins to feel, which starts to take her out of her well-established role as a housewife and mark the beginning of a personal crisis.

As the story progresses, Irene's internal conflict and dissonance start to affect her public appearance as well. She becomes distracted and melancholic and her behavior is seen as "vague" and out of character (Cheever, 38). The fragment below is a clear indicator of Irene's change in personality due to the psychological strain caused by the conversations she addictively listens to through her new radio:

> There was in her face, when she returned to her husband, a look of radiant melancholy that he was not familiar with. Her conduct at the dinner party that night seemed strange to him, too. She interrupted the hostess rudely and stared at the people across the table from her with an intensity for which she would have punished her children. (Cheever, 39)

The "look of radiant melancholy" in her face signals a complex emotional state of sadness that, as a woman, she is expected to suppress in order to ensure "the emotional well-being of their family" (England, 29). At the dinner party, her performance of polite femininity collapses entirely; she interrupts the hostess "rudely" and stares at other

guests “with an intensity for which she would have punished her children.” This sudden change in behavior reflects Irene’s growing and uncontainable emotional chaos, through which Cheever starts to hint at the unsustainable and gendered burden of maintaining domestic and moral order at all times. In this way, the surreal element of the enormous radio—or the “aggressive intruder”, as Irene calls it (Cheever, 34)—becomes a metaphorical intrusion into her domestic role as a woman, exposing her to the troubled reality of others and, in so doing, isolating her from the comforting illusions that used to underpin her gender identity. Moreover, apart from representing her growing estrangement from the ideals of domesticity and emotional containment, the enormous radio can also be seen as the only element that individualises Irene. This intrusion in her performed femininity leads her—most probably for the first time in her adult life—not to be the woman she is demanded to be by her stifling environment. The new feelings that the radio awakes in her make Irene stop being part of a homogenous community and consequently regain her individuality. Unconsciously, and due to the anxiety caused by the conversations she secretly overhears, she changes from always adhering to the norm to acting on the basis of her real feelings and impulses—even if that makes her look impolite or rude. Thus, due to the disruption caused by the surreal element of the radio, Irene’s true personality emerges all the sudden in an environment where “it is the surface that matters and reality is often hidden under [a] glossy cover” (Vlachová, 14).

The conflict between how Irene is expected to perform and how she actually behaves intensifies when she finds out that “Mr Osborn’s hitting his wife” (Cheever, 39). Rather than complying with her community’s “self-contained culture” (Collins, 4), she desperately asks Jim to go to their neighbour’s apartment and stop him. Irene’s impossibility of maintaining composure in the face of growing internal distress reveals the limitations of this pre-suburban ideal. In this way, her emotional labor, far from

fulfilling, becomes a source of quiet alienation as her identity is consumed by a constant performance of composed femininity that eventually becomes incompatible with her psychological distress. This emotional conflict reaches its peak when Irene is no longer able to reconcile what she hears with the idealized version of life she has internalized. Overwhelmed by the suffering around her, Irene breaks down and she clings—in a moment of desperation—to the image of the perfect domestic life, frantically seeking reassurance from her husband:

> "Oh, don't, don't, don't," she cried. "Life is too terrible, too sordid and awful. But we've never been like that, have we, darling? Have we? I mean, we've always been good and decent and loving to one another, haven't we? And we have two children, two beautiful children. Our lives aren't sordid, are they, darling? Are they?" She flung her arms around his neck and drew his face down to hers. "We're happy, aren't we, darling? We are happy, aren't we?" (Cheever, 40)

The fragment above shows, as Vlachová points out in her study, how "all the facts Irene finds out about the lives of the people around her, all the problems and sorrow that plague them, make her doubt her own happiness" (17). This surreal element has completely destabilized Irene's identity, making her feel so distant from the woman she is expected to be—composed, nurturing, and emotionally contained—that she desperately tries to grasp for meaning and stability by clinging to the illusion of marital harmony and moral superiority. Her need to believe that she and Jim are still "good and decent and loving to one another" reflects her dependence on external validation to suppress the inner chaos that the radio has unleashed. Irene's desperate pleading for reassurance indicates deep self-doubt and a great need for emotional anchoring, which highlights the fragility of her sense of self caused by the disengagement from the performative domestic role she has always played. However, instead of feeling relieved, Irene sinks deeper into insecurity and dependency, exposing how the pressure to maintain a perfectly polished domestic life has profoundly disrupted her mental well-being. In a way, she has been seeking refuge in her neighbours' dysfunctional

households to escape her own emotional dissatisfaction using the radio not just as entertainment, but as a form of validation. However, as Vlachová puts it, "it turns out that there are problems under the surface of Irene's life as well as there have been under the surface of her neighbours'" (18). Jim's harsh accusations in the final argument make it clear that, as much as Irene tries to seek stability and approval by performing as the ideal post-war woman, it is all appearance. Beneath the hypocritical polished façade that society expects her to maintain, there are not-so-bright secrets such as fraud, greed, and even an abortion. As Jim asks her scornfully: *"*where was all your piety and your virtue when you went to that abortionist?" (Cheever, 41) In this way, Irene's addiction to the radio and the resulting emotional breakdown reveal the unsustainability of conforming to a series of gender norms that, when shaken, lead to a full collapse of self. In this way, Irene's alienation is not physical or social, but rather existential, as she becomes a stranger not only to her community and her husband, but also to herself.

1.3. Breadwinning and the Denial of Emotional Depth

Returning to Butler's theory of gender performativity, it is clear that just as a series of repetitive practices constitute Irene's gender identity, there is also "a uniform repetition of a masculinist identity economy" orbiting around Jim (Butler, 40). Portrayed essentially as a breadwinner, Jim aligns with the post-war ideal of the male provider. In "The Enormous Radio" he is associated with "the public sphere of production, waged work, and political activity" (England, 25). He returns home each evening after a long day's work and is reunited with his family. However, there is little to no mention of the type of relationship the father has with his children, which emphasizes that childcare is in Irene's hands, while he is responsible for financially supporting the household. This

division of roles is reinforced in the couple's conversations, particularly when tensions surrounding finances arise. When Jim confronts Irene about the cost of the radio and her unpaid clothing bills, his frustration reveals both the pressures of maintaining his role and the resentment that can come with it:

> "Four hundred dollars is a good deal more than I can afford," he went on. "I wanted to get something that you'd enjoy. It's the last extravagance we'll be able to indulge in this year. I see that you haven't paid your clothing bills yet. I saw them on your dressing table." He looked directly at her. "Why did you tell me you'd paid them? Why did you lie to me?"
> "I just didn't want you to worry, Jim," she said. She drank some water. "I'll be able to pay my bills out of this month's allowance. There were the slipcovers last month, and that party."
> "You've got to learn to handle the money I give you a little more intelligently, Irene," he said. "You've got to understand that we won't have as much money this year as we had last. I had a very sobering talk with Mitchell today. No one is buying anything. We're spending all our time promoting new issues, and you know how long that takes. I'm not getting any younger, you know. I'm thirty-seven. My hair will be gray next year. I haven't done as well as I'd hoped to do. And I don't suppose things will get any better."
> "Yes, dear," she said.
> "We've got to start cutting down," Jim said. "We've got to think of the children. To be perfectly frank with you, I worry about money a great deal. I'm not at all sure of the future. No one is. If anything should happen to me, there's the insurance, but that wouldn't go very far today. I've worked awfully hard to give you and the children a comfortable life," he said bitterly. "I don't like to see all of my energies, all of my youth, wasted in fur coats and radios and slipcovers." (Cheever, 40-41)

The gendered division of labor is reflected in Jim's judgment of Irene's financial management. In a rather disciplinary tone, Jim not only expresses his concerns, but also corrects Irene. This establishes him as the economic authority and moral arbiter of the household to which Irene and the children are subjected. Irene's apologetic and submissive responses—"I just didn't want you to worry, Jim,"— further reiterate this hierarchy and, at the same time, confirm Jim's authoritative role. In this way, his masculinity is maintained through a consistent performance of control, rationality, and financial management. As seen in the excerpt above, Jim's role is to work "awfully hard" to provide a "comfortable life" for his family. However, when this stability escapes his control—"no one is buying anything"—Jim's carefully maintained masculine identity begins to show signs of strain. He voices his concerns about finances

and the future in a “bitter” tone, suggesting pent-up resentment that hints at the emotional cost of conforming to rigid gender expectations: “I don’t like to see all of my energies, all of my youth, wasted in fur coats and radios and slipcovers.” His repeated references to aging and his admission that he has “not done as well as [he’d] hoped” also reveal a sense of failure—or at least of inadequacy—in meeting societal expectations of reaching “that satisfactory average of income endeavor and respectability” (Cheever, 33). This fragment therefore illustrates Butler’s idea that gender is not an expression of inner truth but a culturally enforced script. What emerges in this dialogue between husband and wife is not just a critique of Irene’s financial mismanagement, but also a glimpse into a man burdened by the demands of masculinity, economic pressure, and emotional containment.

This last element is crucial for understanding how Jim embodies—and at the same time is affected by—the ideal of post-war masculinity. Jim Westcott represents a model of manhood built on emotional repression and denial of vulnerability. He is expected to systematically suppress his fears and anxieties—“I worry about money a great deal” (Cheever, 41)—while detaching himself from domestic intimacy. His role is therefore limited to ensuring financial stability and solving practical problems around the house such as buying a new radio; seldom is he involved in the more intimate aspects of family life. When confronted with his wife’s emotional breakdown, his reaction is marked by condescension and dismissal—“Well, if it’s so depressing, why do you listen to it?” (Cheever, 40)—reinforcing the gendered expectation that men must remain stoic and unaffected. This emotional restraint, however, is not sustainable. As things become more tense, Jim reaches a breaking point and explodes in anger. What starts as frustration quickly escalates into a personal attack, revealing resentments he has kept buried beneath the surface. This argument between husband and wife

demonstrates the pressure Jim is under, not only financially but also emotionally. Men like him are expected to remain calm, in control, and never show weakness; but instead of talking about his feelings, Jim lashes out, using anger and guilt as a way of coping:

> "Oh, I'm sick!" he shouted. "I'm sick to death of your apprehensiveness. The radio can't hear us. Nobody can hear us. And what if they can hear us? Who cares?" Irene got up from the table and went into the living room. Jim went to the door and shouted at her from there. "Why are you so Christly all of a sudden? What's turned you overnight into a convent girl? You stole your mother's jewelry before they probated her will. You never gave your sister a cent of that money that was intended for her-not even when she needed it. You made Grace Howland's life miserable, and where was all your piety and your virtue when you went to that abortionist? I'll never forget how cool you were. You packed your bag and went off to have that child murdered as if you were going to Nassau. If you'd had any reasons, if you'd had any good reasons—" (Cheever, 41)

As Irene becomes disturbed by what she hears on the radio, Jim downplays her concerns accusing her of overreacting: "Nobody can hear us. And what if they can hear us? Who cares?" He refuses to acknowledge the emotional depth of Irene's concerns and tries to invalidate her feelings by using the past against her. Jim launches into a scathing monologue in which he lists Irene's faults to demonstrate her hypocrisy, but his speech also suggests he holds a grudge for the decisions she once took: "If you'd had any reasons, if you'd had any good reasons". Irene, however, stops listening to him at this point, becoming completely absorbed by the radio. Although Jim voices his frustration, not once does he express vulnerability or empathy. Instead, he uses the facts to shame Irene while remaining emotionally distant himself. In this way, Jim Westcott embodies the post-war male ideal of the rational and composed husband; a performative behavior that consolidates his masculinity, but simultaneously denies him his full personality and ultimately alienates him.

His inability to engage with emotional complexity prevents him from connecting not only with Irene, but with his own capacity for introspection. On the one hand we see the facade of the "happy" couple completely shatter, revealing the raw emotional reality

they both expeerience, as when he exclaims, “I’m sick to death of your apprehensiveness.” The boundaries between the private and the public sphere collapse completely and the Westcotts are no longer perceived as the united picture-perfect family. Instead, we are introduced to two terribly isolated individuals within their gender performance. On the other hand, Jim’s value as a man is measured through the intellectualized control he exerts over his own emotions, leaving little room for genuine self-expression or intimacy. His estrangement is not a personal flaw, however, but rather a symptom of the broader cultural norms that discourage men from expressing or acknowledging emotion in order to “render gender identity uniform” (Butler, 43).

2. The Country Husband

2.1. Mechanized Conformity and the Suburban Ideal

Published in 1954, “The Country Husband” is a short story about Francis Weed, a man who one day experiences an emergency landing when the plane he is traveling in goes through repeated turbulence. After this near-death experience, Francis comes home to his family house in Shady Hill. However, his wife and children seem too preoccupied with trivial matters to pay much attention to him or his story. As the days go on, Francis grows more dissatisfied with his comfortable, conventional suburban life; to the point that he becomes obsessed with the young babysitter, Anne Murchison. The beginning of the story presents the Weeds in the fictional suburban landscape of Shady Hill; a community of virtually identical houses and perfectly manicured lawns, much like the one the Westcotts in “The Enormous Radio” aspire to live in one day. Just as the Sutton Place apartment showed how post-war suburban values had permeated the ideals of people in the city in the immediate post-war, Shady Hill represents, a few years later,

the consolidation of these in a community where there is only room for appearances and hegemonic conformity. After his plane crashes, Francis comes home to his Dutch Colonial House, whose functioning mirrors in a subtle but powerful way the broader dynamics of Shady Hill:

> The largest part of the living room centered on a fireplace. On the right were some bookshelves and a piano. The room was polished and tranquil, and from the windows that opened to the west there was some late-summer sunlight, brilliant and as clear as water. Nothing here was neglected; nothing had not been burnished. It was not the kind of household where, after prying open a stuck cigarette box, you would find an old shirt button and a tarnished nickel. The hearth was swept, the roses on the piano were reflected in the polish of the broad top, and there was an album of Schubert waltzes on the rack. (Cheever, 326)

The Weed's residence is perfectly ordered and carefully designed in a way that is both comforting and aesthetically pleasing. It is described as a tranquil, almost heavenly place where "the late-summer sunlight" is "brilliant and as clear as water." The central placement of the fireplace suggests warmth, but the feeling is almost too composed. The "burnished" room, the "swept" floors, and the "polished" piano reflect a surface-obsessed environment, where appearance seems to come before anything else. Such a level of tidiness indicates preparation rather than spontaneity, which suggests that the roses on the piano "reflected in the polish of the broad top" or "the Schubert waltzes album on the rack" are unlikely to be there for the Weeds' own enjoyment. Instead, they seem to be part of a meticulously crafted aesthetic curated to project tranquility, taste, and control. In a place like Shady Hill, where dinner parties are hosted every night and neighbours might stop by at any time, excessive order and carefully chosen decorative elements feel less like a personal choice and more like a socially coded gesture of genteel hospitality that ensures the family conformity to suburban expectations. Like the rest of Shady Hill, The Weeds' house is a place where everything is where it is expected to be; a space where real emotion and messiness have been

designed out of existence, and where individuals like Francis find themselves increasingly estranged.

Just as the Weeds' house is not "the kind of household where, after prying open a stuck cigarette box, you would find an old shirt button and a tarnished nickel," Shady Hill is not the kind of community where personal difference or uncomfortable truths are allowed to surface. Francis' neighbourhood is one of mannered and educated people who know the "Moonlight Sonata" (Cheever, 329)—which might represent a kind of clichéd performance of taste rather than a genuine love of music—and can only associate with a restricted number of people who conform to the norm. In Shady Hill, nature itself is tamed to suit its community's well-established principles. Even the "miserable" cat that wanders into the garden at the end of the story has been "securely buttoned into a doll's dress" to conceal its wildness (Cheever, 346); which hints at a deep-seated need to deny anything that challenges this community's illusion of happiness, order, and stability. However, "natural impulses of freedom and dissolution" seem to be "stronger than man's insistence on order and construction" (Hipkiss, 579); or at least that is what Jupiter—the Mercers' retriever—represents:

> Jupiter was an anomaly. His retrieving instincts and his high spirits were out of place in Shady Hill. (…) Jupiter went where he pleased, ransacking wastebaskets, clotheslines, garbage pails, and shoe bags. He broke up garden parties and tennis matches, and got mixed up in the processional at Christ Church on Sunday, barking at the men in red dresses. He crashed through old Mr. Nixon's rose garden two or three times a day, cutting a wide swath through the Condesa de Sastagos, and as soon as Donald Goslin lighted his barbecue fire on Thursday nights, Jupiter would get the scent (…) he would spring onto the terrace, lift the steak lightly off the fire, and run away with the Goslins' dinner. Jupiter's days were numbered. The Wrightsons' German gardener or the Farquarsons' cook would soon poison him. Even old Mr. Nixon might put some arsenic in the garbage that Jupiter loved. (Cheever, 329)

Unlike the people of Shady Hill, Jupiter moves instinctively and unapologetically. Crashing through gardens, stealing food, or disrupting rituals, the retriever continuously asserts his presence in spaces designed to exclude wildness and chaos. His mischievous

freedom stands in direct opposition to the rigid standards that define the community. The threat he poses is, therefore, not physical but symbolic. He embodies all the impulses that the suburbs try to suppress; and for that reason "Jupiter's days [are] numbered." He will soon be erased, as any neighbour "would soon poison him".

This impulse to eliminate anomalies extends beyond animals, to human experience itself. While dining with the Farquarsons the day after his plane accident, Francis thinks he has seen the maid who is passing the drinks before. After some reflection, he realizes where he had seen her: "it had been at the end of the war" (Cheever, 330). The maid was the woman "who had lived with the German commandant during the Occupation" (Cheever, 330) and who—consequently—was publicly disciplined. However, as Francis observes, people in his community "seemed united in their tacit claim that there had been no past, no war—that there was no danger or trouble in the world" (Cheever, 331). For that reason, when he realizes the Farquasons' new maid is the same woman "who had been punished at the crossroad" (Cheever, 331), he decides to stay silent—as "the atmosphere of Shady Hill made the memory unseemly and impolite" (Cheever, 331).

Just as Shady Hill systematically erases anomalies or not-so-bright realities, it also casts out families like the Thomases. Being "the only family that lacked a piece" (Cheever, 338), their fatherless family structure does not conform to Shady Hill's sanitized image of domestic perfection—where all "the other marriages [are] intact and productive" (Cheever, 338). The Thomases are therefore bound to—and most definitely will—leave the suburbs and move back to the heterogeneous city of New York. However, it is Clayton Thomas' own awareness—and consequent rejection—of Shady Hill's false harmony that seals their departure:

> "And all the dovecotes are phony," Clayton said. "And the way people clutter up their lives. I've thought about it a lot, and what seems to me to be really wrong with Shady Hill is that it doesn't have any future. So much energy is spent in perpetuating the place—in keeping out undesirables, and so forth—that the only idea of the future anyone has is just more and more commuting trains and more parties. I don't think that's healthy. I think people ought to be able to dream big dreams about the future. I think people ought to be able to dream great dreams." (Cheever, 338)

An outsider by design, Clayton Thomas is the one who "catalogs the frustrations of Shady Hill" (Hipkiss, 584). He comes to the conclusion that this supposedly idyllic suburbia is actually lifeless, repetitive, and terrified of differences or "undesirables" like himself. He is able to identify emptiness and refuses to fit into a community that suppresses all that is real, raw, or wild. As Clayton rightly points out, "people should dream big dreams," but Shady Hill is not the place for that. Its residents are "members of the successful upper middle class" who "want at all costs to believe that they have found in Shady Hill an untroubled paradise, the appropriate reward for their labor and intelligence" (Hipkiss, 578). Therefore, the only possible future in Shady Hill is "more commuting trains and more parties." Staying in the suburbs means, in this way, repressing any prospect of a genuinely happy and fulfilling future in order to preserve a certain sense of stability provided by their performative role in this entrapping community. This illusion of comfort, however, comes at the expense of emotional truth and personal freedom; and anyone or anything daring to challenge its apparent unity is bound to be cast out.

An illustrative example of this behaviour is when, on his way to work Francis is contemplating the trains and cars arriving covered in snow—a "first sign of autumn" that "thrilled him" (Cheever, 333)— and he is suddenly interrupted by his neighbour Mrs. Wrightson. The old woman, without being asked by Francis, embarks on a monologue of complaints about some curtains that were not the right length—the very reason for which she is on the train on her way to the city. Francis—irritated and

unwilling to perform the expected compliant rol—responds: “I know what to do with them (…) paint them black and shut up” (Cheever, 334). Consequently, days later, Mrs. Wrightson invites “everyone in Shady Hill to her anniversary” (Cheever, 339) but the Weeds; which shows how in this community that which does not conform is systematically excluded. As Julia rightly points out when she reproaches her husband for his insulting behavior: “Mrs. Wrightson runs Shady Hill and has run it for the last forty years” (Cheever, 340). So, failure to behave according to the suburban modal code represented by Mrs. Wrightson means not being invited to any social events—or even that Francis’ daughter Helen can be kept “from going to the dances” (Cheever, 340). In this way, the suburban community of Shady Hill survives by denying and outcasting what it cannot control, and in doing so, traps its residents in lives that may appear polished and complete, but are ultimately hollow, alienating and constrained by the obligation to comply with a strict code of behavior.

2.2. Female Isolation and Silent Desperation

Nowhere is this dynamic more evident than in the strict role suburban women are expected to perform within this demanding and strictly homogenizing community. When Francis comes home to his perfectly arranged Dutch Colonial house with a “long table, laid for six” (Cheever, 326), it becomes clear for the reader that someone must be behind this meticulously crafted domestic space. This labor is Julia’s responsibility—Francis’ wife and the mother of the children. The house’s untouched appearance is not the result of shared effort but rather the product of Julia’s constant, quiet work. Just like Irene Westcott in “The Enormous Radio”, Julia Weed is expected to embody the ideal suburban housewife: efficient, graceful, and emotionally compliant.

Her labor is therefore not just practical but symbolic, as she is expected to preserve the illusion of a stable, successful family that aligns with Shady Hill's narrow ideals. Her role as a woman, then, seems to be rooted in performance rather than innate gender identity. As Simone de Beauvoir claimed in *The Second Sex*, "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one" (qtd. in Butler, 11); and this appears to be the case in Cheever's suburbia. Butler expands on this idea arguing that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (45). In this way, Julia would be therefore performing her role as a wife and mother rather than just being one; playing this character daily within a structure that leaves little room for any deviation. This performative role of gender is especially evident in an argument with his husband in which Julia is held responsible for the domestic functioning. Julia is expected to control dinner and the children, and her husband reproaches her when the situation is not to his liking:

> Francis asks Julia if the children couldn't have their dinner earlier. Julia's guns are loaded for this. She can't cook two dinners and lay two tables. She paints with lightning strokes that panorama of drudgery in which her youth, her beauty, and her wit have been lost. Francis says that he must be understood; he was nearly killed in an airplane crash, and he doesn't like to come home every night to a battlefield. Now Julia is deeply concerned. Her voice trembles. He doesn't come home every night to a battlefield. The accusation is stupid and mean. Everything was tranquil until he arrived. She stops speaking, puts down her knife and fork, and looks into her plate as if it is a gulf. She begins to cry. "Poor Mummy!" Toby says, and when Julia gets up from the table, drying her tears with a napkin, Toby goes to her side. "Poor Mummy," he says. "Poor Mummy!" And they climb the stairs together. (Cheever, 328)

Julia is clearly positioned within the domestic sphere as the figure responsible for maintaining household order—an expectation she must fulfill again and again until it appears natural and self-evident. Her femininity is thus constructed by this sort of repetitive behavior; and when she fails to live up to her husband's demands or certain social expectations, she is held accountable for it. Julia's reaction to Francis'

confrontational request—"Francis asks Julia if the children couldn't have their dinner earlier"—reveals how exhausting this repeated performance has become for her. Her refusal to "cook two dinners" and "lay two tables" shows a rare glimpse of resistance against a role "in which her youth, her beauty, and her wit have been lost." Julia's body language, her trembling voice, her silence, and her quiet tears hint at a certain frustration repressed during all her years embodying the perfect wife, mother, and homemaker. However, in spite of having unloaded "her guns" at the dinner table, she immediately suppresses her frustration and reverts to the compliant, nurturing role expected of her. As seen at the end of this passage, she comes back downstairs after the heated argument with her husband and blows out the candles (Cheever, 329), making sure everything is in order before the family goes to bed. This shift from assertiveness to self-effacement—back to her flawless performance of the usual gendered script—exemplifies Butler's concept of gender as a "repeated stylization of the body" enacted "within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (45). Despite her underlying feelings of frustration and unhappiness, Julia reinforces the illusion of domestic bliss while suppressing her individuality and emotional truth; and her individual suffering is thus absorbed and neutralized by a larger system that rewards such conformity.

This suppression in favor of rigid suburban expectations inevitably results in a deep sense of entrapment and alienation. Much like Irene Westcott in "The Enormous Radio", Julia Weed's identity is also defined—almost entirely—by her domestic role. Both women experience a profound sense of alienation produced by the repetitive roles they are forced to perform. Such feelings of entrapment lead through similar obsessive behaviour:

> Julia and Francis Weed went out a great deal. Julia was well liked and gregarious, and her love of parties sprang from a most natural dread of chaos and loneliness. She went through her morning mail with real anxiety, looking for invitations, and she usually

> found some, but she was insatiable, and if she had gone out seven nights a week, it would not have cured her of a reflective look—the look of someone who hears distant music—for she would always suppose that there was a more brilliant party somewhere else. Francis limited her to two week-night parties, putting a flexible interpretation on Friday, and rode through the weekend like a dory in a gale. (Cheever, 329-330)

For Irene, the faulty radio becomes a portal into a more vivid world beyond her domestic routine. For Julia, the search for ever "more brilliant parties" functions in the same way. While outwardly "gregarious", Julia's constant need for parties is not rooted in joy or genuine connection but in "a most natural dread of chaos and loneliness." As reflected in her frantic search for invitations, she attempts to fill a void created during years of self-effacement by insatiably attending her neighbours' parties. However, these social gatherings serve not only as a momentary distraction or escape from Julia's domestic role, but also as a form of validation and reassurance. In a way, being invited to parties can be interpreted as a type of social approval or recognition. So Julia's "anxiety" in rummaging through the mail may come from a deep need for acceptance from her community; since fitting in Shady Hill's strict standards would supposedly grant her a perfectly happy, stable life. Nevertheless, despite attending multiple parties a week, Julia continues to be haunted by "the look of someone who hears distant music," a metaphor that suggests an unshakable sense of yearning and disconnection. Julia inevitably longs for something beyond the narrow confines of her life in the suburbs. She yearns for a kind of meaning and selfhood that her environment cannot provide; as there is no room for truth and self-expression in Shady Hill. Thus, while Julia constantly expresses a deep and isolating dissatisfaction with her performative gender role, she seems to operate under the belief that she is the problem—or at least somehow to blame. In an effort to suppress her unhappiness, she seeks comfort in the evidence that she is needed in her interpersonal relationships. This desire for validation manifests not only through her social standing within the community but also within her domestic environment. When she argues with her husband and she finally voices her true feelings

of dissatisfaction, Julia threatens to leave Shady Hill altogether. However, she finds herself unable to follow through, held back by a deeply rooted fear of inadequacy and by the constraints of the very system that entraps her. As her husband insists, she cannot leave because she has "come to be dependent on" him (Cheever, 342). Unable to escape, Julia is left with no option but to convince herself that she must stay; not for her own sake, but because her husband needs her. "I guess I'd better stay and take care of you for a little while longer" (Cheever, 342), she tells him, resigning herself to her role. In doing so, she erases her own authentic needs once more, clinging to the illusion of purpose while remaining profoundly alienated in a life that does not—and will never—fulfill her.

2.3. Repressed Desire and Suburban Discontent

Just as Julia is confined to the domestic role of the ideal suburban wife, Francis is expected to embody the figure of the ideal suburban man. Like Jim Westcott in "The Enormous Radio", Francis is portrayed as the breadwinner of the family. He is therefore associated with England's aforementioned concept of "the public sphere" (25) and expected to spend most of his time at work—and in "the commuting train that he took five nights a week to his home in Shady Hill" (Cheever, 326). As could not be otherwise in this hegemonic suburban neighborhood, Francis is an accomplished man, and it is his competitive success in business that "has earned him his colonial estate in Shady Hill" (Hipkiss, 577). However, as Robert A. Hipkiss indicates, this symbolic achievement of stability "like the Gaul, will be hard to preserve" (577); as fitting into the suburban ideal of masculinity is about much more than making money. The comparison of the living room with the Gaul, a once-great but vulnerable empire, at the beginning of the story

—“divided like Gaul into three parts” (Cheever, 326)—suggests that the life Francis has built is not secured, even if it appears to be so. Being a man in a community like Shady Hill means maintaining an authoritarian and emotionally detached facade even in the face of emotional and existential collapse; and the moment these requirements are not met, everything could simply fall apart. Thus, as ironic as it may seem, Francis’s life is a clear example of how the suburban pursuit of stability breeds its own kind of instability; and in order to preserve this illusion of control, he must constantly perform in accordance with Shady Hill’s demanding expectations. Francis’ daily life, like his home, is therefore predictable and unoriginal, reflecting a rigid adherence to suburban ideals that leave little room for authenticity or introspection. This performance extends into his family life, where—like in the Westcotts’ household—emotional detachment is not only common but structurally reinforced:

> Neither Louisa nor Henry has come to the table. Little Toby is still howling, lying face down on the floor. Francis speaks to him gently: “Daddy was in a plane crash this afternoon, Toby. Don’t you want to hear about it?” Toby goes on crying. “If you don’t come to the table now, Toby,” Francis says, “I’ll have to send you to bed without any supper.” The little boy rises, gives him a cutting look, flies up the stairs to his bedroom, and slams the door. “Oh dear,” Julia says, and starts to go after him. Francis says that she will spoil him. Julia says that Toby is ten pounds underweight and has to be encouraged to eat. Winter is coming, and he will spend the cold months in bed unless he has his dinner. Julia goes upstairs. Francis sits down at the table with Helen. Helen is suffering from the dismal feeling of having read too intently on a fine day, and she gives her father and the room a jaded look. She doesn’t understand about the plane crash, because there wasn’t a drop of rain in Shady Hill. (Cheever, 328)

In this fragment, Francis attempts to share his plane crash experience with his young son, Toby. However, the interaction quickly goes from a moment of potential intimacy to a demonstration of discipline. Rather than attempting to comfort or understand Toby’s distress, Francis threatens to send the child to bed without supper; adhering in this way to the role of the distant, authoritative father figure. He sits passively at the table while Julia, once again, is the one expected to manage the emotional needs of the children. Even his daughter Helen responds to him with a “jaded look”—expressing

clear disconnection between father and daughter. However, this emotional absence is not read as failure in Shady Hill, but rather as an expected expression of masculine competence. This rigid performance of suburban masculinity ultimately isolates Francis; as his role as an emotionally restrained, authoritative father leaves no space for vulnerability or genuine intimacy, making it impossible for him to form deep, authentic connections—not even with his family.

In Francis' life everything seems flattened and distant, as if filtered through the lens of performance rather than presence. This feeling of alienation becomes clear when Francis thinks he sees Anne on the train, but it turns out to be another woman:

> Coming up to her, all his feelings warm and bent in her direction, he put his hand on the back of her seat—even this touch warmed him—and leaning down to speak to her, he saw that it was not Anne. It was an older woman wearing glasses. He went on deliberately into another car, his face red with embarrassment and the much deeper feeling of having his good sense challenged; for if he couldn't tell one person from another, what evidence what evidence was there that his wife Julia and the children had as much reality as his dreams of iniquity in Paris or the litter, the grass smell, and the cave-shaped trees in Lovers' Lane. (Cheever, 343)

At this moment, Francis confronts the terrifying possibility that the domestic life which was meant to be the proof of his success and stability lacks substance. His inability to clearly distinguish reality is evidence of the emotional numbness produced by a life of performative duties and appearances. Trapped in a role that demands detachment and mastery, Francis is thus left adrift, unable to find meaning even in the life he has supposedly constructed for himself with blood, sweat, and tears. This growing alienation leads him to construct an inner fantasy world in which he idealizes their new nanny, Anne Murchison, who becomes a symbol of escape and renewal. Feeling increasingly estranged not only from Julia but from the very life he has built in Shady Hill, "Francis cannot help but feel that more is involved in his growing sense of isolation than the failure of communication and sexual connection between himself and

his wife" (Hipkiss, 578). Trapped in the emotionally detached role expected from him, Francis turns to the romantic idealization of Anne, whom he expects to bring meaning and excitement back into his life. Hipkiss describes his longing for her as "his sole outlet for his frustrated warring lust in conventional Shady Hill" (Hipkiss, 579), suggesting that Anne represents everything his environment suppresses. She represents the possibility of something different: desire, independence, and freedom. In other words, Anne isn't just a woman to Francis; she becomes a fantasy, a way to cope with the feeling that everything around him is artificial and repressive. In clinging to Anne, Francis attempts therefore to resist his suffocating performative role by asserting his capacity for passion and sensuality. Earlier in the story, after a brief moment of rebellion towards the old Mrs. Wrightson and her curtains, Francis feels "thankful to Anne Murchison for this bracing sensation of independence" (Cheever, 334). In this way, thinking of Anne allows him to reclaim some part of himself. However, his longing for her becomes so intense that he starts projecting his desire everywhere, causing him to hallucinate and mistake "an older woman wearing glasses" for Anne—blurring the line between reality and fantasy. Francis's fixation on Anne is ultimately a symptom of how alienated he is, not just from others but from his own desires, which he's been taught to repress in order to fit the mold of the suburban man.

Even though Francis is clearly drawn to Anne and what she symbolizes he ultimately tries to push those feelings down, knowing that giving in would mean risking everything he has built in Shady Hill. As Hipkiss points out, Francis may secretly want to destroy the "instinct-denying, nature-suppressing conventions" (578) of his suburban life, but he also realizes that succumbing to his feelings would unravel the carefully maintained world he and others rely on. This internal conflict reaches a breaking point when Julia defends their suburban lifestyle so effectively that Francis, unable to respond

with words, “struck her full in the face” (Cheever, 340)—a violent sign of how much he has been suppressing, of how emotionally bottled-up he has become. In a way, he senses that indulging his lust could ruin his marriage and expose him to moral and social exile, as scandal is not allowed in Shady Hill. One afternoon in his office, Francis stares at the picture of his children and cannot help but think about what it would mean to give in to his desire for young Anne:

> There was nothing to mitigate his feeling—nothing that laughter or a game of softball with the children would change—and, thinking back over the plane crash, the Farquarsons' new maid, and Anne Murchison’s difficulties with her drunken father, he wondered how he could have avoided arriving at just where he was. He was in trouble. He had been lost once in his life, coming back from a trout stream in the north woods, and he had now the same bleak realization that no amount of cheerfulness or hopefulness or valor or perseverance could help him find, in the gathering dark, the path that he’d lost. He smelled the forest. The feeling of bleakness was intolerable, and he saw clearly that he had reached the point where he would have to make a choice.
> He could go to a psychiatrist, like Miss Rainey; he could go to church and confess his lusts; he could go to a Danish massage parlor in the West Seventies that had been recommended by a salesman; he could rape the girl or trust that he would somehow be prevented from doing this; or he could get drunk. It was his life, his boat, and, like every other man, he was made to be the father of thousands, and what harm could there be in a tryst that would make them both feel more kindly toward the world? This was the wrong train of thought, and he came back to the first, the psychiatrist. (Cheever, 343-344)

Francis knows “he was in trouble” and compares his emotional disorientation to being physically lost in the woods. This metaphor captures the depth of his internal conflict and his inability to return to his socially acceptable self. The distance between his private fantasies and the life he is actually living feels so wide that “he felt it affected the muscles of his heart” (Cheever, 400). The fact that it is impossible for him to perform in the way he is expected to perform makes Francis feel totally alienated from his surroundings—wondering “how he could have avoided arriving at just where he was.” He is well-aware that his feelings break with Shaddy Hill’s expectations and that this cannot be any good. The fact that Anne’s father is a lonely alcoholic who lives in an area associated with “the nearly-poor” (Cheever, 332) serves as a grim reminder of what Francis might become if he were to step outside the rigid boundaries of suburban life.

He, therefore, considers a series of troubling options—seeing a psychiatrist, confessing his desires, getting drunk, or even committing assault. The disturbing mention of rape, followed by the hope that something might stop him, highlights both his awareness of how wrong his thoughts are and how desperately he is trying to control them. However, he retreats back to the idea of seeing a psychiatrist as a final effort to return to his expected role, even as it has proved to be increasingly suffocating. In this way, Francis "fails in his private, fearful attempt to break through the bounds of human artifice and the web of obligations and social rewards that comprise Shady Hill"; he is "too timid, too conventional himself, to make the break" (Hipkiss, 584). In the end, it is not Francis but Clayton—the only fatherless son in the community—who dares to criticize Shady Hill's empty conventions and escapes with Anne. Meanwhile, Francis stays behind, increasingly trapped in his own life and, now, even seeing a psychiatrist. While, as Lawrence Jay Dessner notes, Francis "finds 'some true consolation' in the basement woodworking which a psychiatrist had recommended" (58), he is ultimately a man haunted by the possibility of escape who dreams of breaking free but cannot bear the cost of actually doing it.

3. "The Swimmer"

3.1. Suburban Affluence and Collective Denial

Set in the fictional community of Bullet Park, this short story presents Neddy Merril, a middle-aged suburban man who decides to swim home by crossing through all the backyard pools in his wealthy neighborhood—a route that he names "Lucinda River", after his wife. However, what begins as an innocent adventure ends up being a confrontation with reality. As Neddy swims from pool to pool, his journey becomes

increasingly surreal and distorted; and through the whispers and comments of the neighbours, it becomes clear that the character has been living in denial of his personal life and social decline.

Unlike the oppressive and homogenizing settings in “The Enormous Radio” and “The Country Husband”—communities that “connoted inauthenticity and conformity” (George, 526)—“The Swimmer” presents a slightly different suburban landscape. Though still part of Cheever’s suburbia, the community Neddy Merrill swims through seems more fragmented, diverse, and less beholden to the illusion of social uniformity. As Joseph George suggests, Bullet Park “imagines suburbia as a prime space, not for inauthenticity and conformity, but for difference and intersubjectivity” (526). This shift is dramatized in Neddy’s encounters with households that defy the strict suburban norm—such as the Hallorans, who greet him from their swimming pool completely naked. Their “uncompromising zeal for reform” (Cheever, 608), presented without judgment or scandal, suggests a loosening of the rigid behavioral codes that governed earlier stories. The reason for this seems to be rooted, at least in part, in financial wealth. Neddy’s community is significantly wealthier than that of the Westcotts and the Weeds, and that affluence appears to grant its residents a greater margin for eccentricity and self-expression. Part of the contradictory or paradoxical nature of this suburb is therefore how it appears to promote individuality and accept idiosyncrasy, and yet that acceptance is a reflection of wealth and a performance of privilege. Without this wealth, the community would be less tolerant; as individuality here is not necessarily a rejection of conformity, but a version of it made possible by financial means. In fact, Neddy himself starts to be treated differently by his neighbours once his economic security slips away—which suggests that, beneath the surface, Bullet Park is still as dependent on status and appearances as Shady Hill or the Westcotts’ apartment building.

Cheever shows, then, a suburb full of contradictions marked by idiosyncrasy and economic decline, hinting at the dissolution of the suburban fantasy rather than its maintenance. This collapse is not just of the model of suburban ideals, but of economic stability and personal identity as well. As Neddy continues his journey, the signs of economic and personal decline in his community begin to surface more clearly, disrupting in this way the illusion of suburban continuity that was central to the previous two stories. The passage where Neddy reaches the Welchers' house marks a key moment. He is suddenly confronted with a drained pool, packed furniture and a "FOR SALE sign nailed to a tree" (Cheever, 607). Shocked, Neddy tries to remember the last time he and his wife Lucinda "regretted an invitation to dine with them"; but "it seemed only a week ago" (Cheever, 607). He is unsettled, not only because of the disruption of the "Lucinda River", but also because of the realization that change has occurred without his awareness or consent. This moment, however, brings to light a much deeper revelation: the suburb is no longer a space of security or permanence, but one in which economic loss and social unraveling can happen quickly and quietly. As the story unfolds, the reader learns that Neddy himself is not immune to this decline. Neighbors like the Hallorans hint at "misfortunes" and the sale of his house (Cheever, 609), while Grace Biswanger gossips about him going "broke overnight" and begging for a loan drunk on a Sunday (Cheever, 611). These comments, delivered in passing or behind Neddy's back, suggest that his denial has blinded to the complete collapse of his financial and social standing; and what was once a seemingly stable and affluent world is revealed to be terribly fragile.

One of the ways in which this suburban community seems to cope with that fragility is through parties and alcohol. In "The Swimmer", drinking is not just a

pastime—it's a shared habit that helps people escape the parts of their lives they would rather not face. Drinking works, then, as a kind of shared coping mechanism:

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

From the very beginning of the story, the line "I drank too much last night" repeats like a chorus, heard everywhere from the church to the tennis courts, even from the local birdwatching group. It is not just Neddy who drinks too much; it is everyone, and it seems to be the one thing they all admit to. In this way, as Thomas Lee puts it, "it seems reasonable to ask whether this hangover might represent more than just a hangover" (338). It can be interpreted as a metaphor for collective avoidance; as it is not just the result of a night's party, but a symptom of an entire lifestyle built on appearances and distractions. Throwaway comments such as "we all drank too much" emphasize how universal this numbness is in Neddy's community; suggesting that alcohol has become a socially acceptable way to deal with discomfort and regret—a way to keep the truth at bay. The repetitive references to drinking and alcohol throughout the story hint at a deep feeling of collective unease beneath the polished surface—probably caused by the emotional and existential repercussions of the suburban dream: material wealth without fulfillment, social stability without intimacy, comfort without meaning. In this way, Cheever uses alcohol not just as a repeated motif, but as a symbol of the quiet desperation beneath suburban affluence. In the suburban world of Bullet Park—where emotions are repressed and appearances come before reality—drinking becomes both a symptom and a strategy which helps the characters, including Neddy, preserve the illusion that everything is fine even as their lives quietly fall apart.

3.2. Self-delusion and Existential Collapse

At the start of "The Swimmer", Neddy Merrill is presented to the reader. This protagonist is introduced as a man who seems unaffected by time, someone who clings to the image of eternal youth and effortless vitality:

> 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. (Cheever, 603)

This youthful image of Neddy isn't just a description of his appearance or behaviour, but a reflection of the suburban masculine ideal: a man who remains strong, capable, and admired. The confidence and carefree attitude with which he slides "down his banister" or gives "the bronze backside of Aphrodite on the hall table a smack" suggests a man untouched by age, responsibility, or decline. As Judith Butler puts it, "the body appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself" (12); so, in this sense, Neddy's body becomes "inscribed" with a certain performance of confident masculinity that is reflected in the way he moves at the beginning of the story. However, as the story progresses, his once athletic, admired, and seemingly timeless body, becomes a site where cultural meaning has broken down. He initially embodies the cultural ideal of masculine vitality, but by the end, this carefully maintained image falls apart and is emptied of meaning.

As Neddy moves from pool to pool, his energy fades, his body weakens, and others begin to treat him with a mix of pity and distance. This decline becomes evident

when, right at the halfway point of his journey, Neddy has to cross the road in order to continue swimming through his neighbours' pools:

> Had you gone for a Sunday afternoon ride that day you might have seen him, close to naked, standing on the shoulders 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. He had known when he started that this was a part of his journey—it had been on his maps—but confronted with the lines of traffic, worming through the summery light, he found himself unprepared. He was laughed at, jeered at, a beer can was thrown at him, and he had no dignity or humor to bring to the situation. (Cheever, 607)

This passage marks a crucial turning point in the story, as Neddy finds himself in a moment of exposure and vulnerability that contrasts sharply with the youthful, self-assured figure presented at the beginning of the story. Crossing Route 424 forces him out of the private and idealised world of the swimming pools and confronts him with a more public and real environment. Stripped of the context that once gave him meaning, Neddy seems "merely a fool". His near-nudity, previously linked to freedom, seems now ridiculous and humiliating. The fact that "he had no dignity or humour to bring to the situation" suggests that his decline is not only physical, but psychological; he appears to be unable to recover from this humiliation. Moreover, his lack of preparation, despite having anticipated this part of the journey, underlines how deeply he denies not only the literal obstacles in his path, but the reality of aging and his personal decline. The mockery of strangers—who laugh and throw beer cans at him—indicate a change in the way Neddy is perceived; as the man who once embodied suburban masculinity and agility now seems more like a vulnerable, almost tragic figure.

From this moment on, his image begins to break down beyond repair. No longer the confident, youthful figure introduced at the beginning of the story, he is now "treated with contempt" by the people he once "considir[ed] his social inferiors and then

again by his former mistress" (Lee, 329). When he crashes the Biswangers' party, he expects to be welcomed and assumes they will be "honored to give him a drink" (Cheever, 610)—as they had continued to send him and Lucinda invitations even though they were always declined. However, at this party, he is greeted coldly and the bartender serves him "rudely" (Cheever, 611). This is a subtle but telling sign that he has lost his former status, as Neddy himself acknowledges that "to be rebuffed by a part-time barkeep meant that he suffered some loss of social esteem" (Cheever, 611). The social tables seem to have turned—he is no longer admired, but tolerated at best. This fall from grace continues when Neddy swims through the pool of his former mistress, Shirley Adams. There, instead of warmth or nostalgia, Neddy is greeted with scorn: "'What do you want?' she asked" (Cheever, 611). At this point, he is reduced to a figure of pity and possible financial ruin, as instead of going along with Neddy, his former lover calls him immature and reproaches him: "if you've come here for money (…) I won't give you another cent" (Cheever, 611). He begins to feel the weight of these changes and, disoriented by what feels like the sudden shift in season—he sees the constellations of winter despite believing it is still midsummer—he starts to cry. His physical exhaustion mirrors his emotional collapse; and all of these moments of being looked down and ignored by those who once respected him, point to the complete breakdown of Neddy's strong and successful image. He becomes unrecognizable, even to himself. He does not seem to understand who he is or what has happened to him—a reality that becomes evident when he finally arrives at his house, only to see "that the place was empty" (Cheever, 612). His family is long gone, and with them, what was left of the life he thought he still had.

As seen throughout these revealing encounters, Neddy's performance of the suburban ideal of masculinity has failed; and what remains is a man who no longer

knows who he is or how he got there. Drawing from the patterns in Cheever's earlier work, it can be inferred that Neddy's feelings of estrangement likely stem from similar situations. However, rather than being caused by the pressure to perform an idealized version of masculinity that leaves no room for deviance, the cause seems to be the coping mechanism employed to avoid facing his not-so-perfect reality. Unlike "The Enormous Radio" and "The Country Husband", where the causes of male alienation are directly linked to the pressures of financial success and emotional repression, "The Swimmer" leaves the origins of Neddy's downfall more ambiguous. He also appears to be less repressed than the other male characters previously discussed, and he even seems comfortable in his role. However, he still needs to imagine himself as an "original" and even "legendary" figure, and his swim across the county is part of that:

> His life was not confining and the delight he took in this observation could not be explained by its suggestion of escape. He seemed to see, with a cartographer's eye, that string of swimming pools, that quasi-subterranean stream that curved across the county. He had made a discovery, a contribution to modern geography; he would name the stream Lucinda after his wife. He was not a practical joker nor was he a fool but he was determinedly original and had a vague and modest idea of himself as a legendary figure. The day was beautiful and it seemed to him that a long swim might enlarge and celebrate its beauty. (Cheever, 603-604)

The narrator seems to suggest that Neddy does not feel the need to escape from his life, but one cannot help but wonder how true that is. Neddy does not seem to consciously or explicitly want to escape his reality. However, his delusions of grandeur and his selective memory imply that he might be already escaping. Alcohol plays a crucial role in this, as whenever he feels tired or put off by his neighbours' comments, Neddy concludes that "he needed a drink" (Cheever, 608). In fact, it is not just a coping mechanism but a substance that enables his ongoing denial to continue. His failure to notice the passage of time, changes in the seasons, and shifts in social position illustrates how deeply his alcoholism has clouded his perception. As it is implied that he has lost his home, his marriage and his social status—markers of suburban male

success—Neddy does not just mourn, he erases drink after drink. In fact, some scholars have highlighted the importance of alcohol in the story "and argued that the story as a whole is a parable of the ruinous effect of alcoholism" (Lee, 340). From this perspective, "The Swimmer" can be read as a kind of allegory for alcoholism; and "the increasing disorientation of the narrative [would be] a consequence of a descent into alcoholic insanity and alcoholic black outs the cause of [Neddy's] loss of memory" (Lee, 340). This reading adds another layer to Cheever's portrayal of suburban life—shifting the focus from social performance to personal deterioration. If the entire community—as previously mentionned—drinks to escape reality, Neddy becomes the extreme case, as he drinks to the point that he becomes alienated not only from his community and family but also from himself. In the end, his journey through the pools turns out to be not only symbolic of a psychological or emotional breakdown, but also of a physical and mental collapse brought on by addiction; one developed to evade the emptiness and pressures of suburban life, but also the hard consequences of being outcast from the suburban order. Through Neddy, Cheever seems to suggest that those who fail to perform the suburban script risk total social and emotional erasure, and that the illusion of belonging is maintained only as long as one plays their part.

3.3. Invisible Labor and Gendered Foundations of Comfort

Although in "The Swimmer" John Cheever does not place female characters at the center of the narrative, their presence is crucial to understanding the gendered framework of the world Neddy Merrill inhabits. So, even though women are not protagonists in the story, they are still essential to the maintenance of suburban order and domestic comfort. Cheever implies the invisible labor women are expected to

perform within the home and the community rather than showing it directly. For instance, at the beginning of the story Neddy walks "towards the smell of coffee in his dining room" (Cheever, 603). There is no mention of who prepared it, but the assumption falls naturally on his wife Lucinda. Her presence lingers—even in absence—suggesting that she fulfills the same kind of traditional domestic role that women like Irene Westcott and Julia Weed are expected to perform; a role which is so taken for granted it becomes invisible. Lucinda is also mentioned as the primary manager of the family's social life. She seems to be responsible for accepting or declining invitations—"when Lucinda said you couldn't come I thought I'd *die*" (Cheever, 605)—maintaining appearances and negotiating the family's reputation in the community. While seemingly superficial, this role is a form of social labor that is essential in preserving the family's status within the rigid hierarchies of Bullet Park. However, Cheever's narrative does not interrogate these tasks directly, but it makes the reader notice that it is this type of unacknowledged work that women do which supports and maintains Neddy's world.

In addition to the expectation that women should manage domestic and social life, "The Swimmer" also portrays them as sources of emotional comfort and fulfillment for the people around them—especially for Neddy. His journey through the pools is punctuated by moments of longing for female companionship, which he associates with stability, safety, and love: "what he needed then was a drink, some company, and some clean, dry clothes" (Cheever, 612). After being unwelcome at the Biswangers' party, Neddy hopes all his "injuries" (Cheever, 611) will be cured at the next pool, that of Shirley Adams, his former mistress. Neddy thus stops by Shirley's house with the implicit expectation that she will offer him comfort or the familiar sort of intimacy they once shared: "love—sexual roughhouse in fact—was the supreme elixir, the pain killer,

the brightly colored pill that would put the spring back into his step, the joy of life in his heart" (Cheever, 611). Yet Shirley rejects him with hostility, signaling that the relationship ended a long time ago—a fact that Neddy seems incapable of processing:

> She seemed confused to see him and he wondered if she was still wounded. Would she, God forbid, weep again?
> "What do you want?" she asked.
> "I'm swimming across the county."
> "Good Christ. Will you ever grow up?"
> "What's the matter?"
> "If you've come here for money," she said, "I won't give you another cent."
> "You could give me a drink."
> "I could but I won't. I'm not alone."
> "Well, I'm on my way."
> 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. (Cheever, 611)

As seen in the excerpt at hand, Neddy approaches Shirley Adams with a rather self-centered expectation that she might comfort him or, at the very least, offer him a drink—without expressing any kind of sensitivity or awareness of their past. Neddy—thus—turns to Shirley not out of concern for her, but because he assumes she will fulfill his emotional needs. Her confusion and defensive tone, however, suggest that Neddy's arrival is both unexpected and unwelcome; but still he seems oblivious to the boundaries she sets—as if not considering her behavior logical or appropriate. This encounter demonstrates the gendered expectation that women exist to provide emotional care, regardless of their own needs or personal circumstances. Neddy's concern that Shirley might "weep again" (Cheever, 611) is framed not with compassion but with irritation, as though her emotions are an inconvenience. He neither apologizes nor engages with her evident irritation. Instead, he positions himself as the one in need and expects her to consequently respond; but Shirley's refusal disrupts his assumptions. In a way, Neddy's entitlement to women's affection and support—even after neglect or absence—might reflect a broader gendered social norm in which men's emotional needs are prioritized and women are expected to absorb and respond to them. As seen in the

fragment above, this performative—and often invisible—gendered behavior in mid-century suburban America is subtly hinted at by the narrative through implication and context, rather than explicit action or depiction. So, although women in "The Swimmer" are not given narrative depth, their roles are indispensable for suburban ideology. They are the silent maintainers of the suburban American dream, whose labor and emotional availability are assumed and rarely acknowledged.

4. Conclusions and Further Research

This TFG has provided a close reading of three of Cheever's short stories—"The Enormous Radio", "The Country Husband", and "The Swimmer"—through the lenses of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, in order to demonstrate that Cheever's depiction of suburbia produces a gendered landscape of estrangement and disconnection in which both male and female characters experience different yet equally deep forms of alienation. In what follows, I will group the conclusions according to the three central themes explored within each section: suburbia, the performance of femininity, and the performance of masculinity.

Throughout the analysis of these short stories, it can be seen how suburbia evolves across Cheever's stories from pre-suburban settings and ideals in "The Enormous Radio", to the oppressive conformity of Shady Hill in "The Country Husband", to its subtle fragmentation and decline in "The Swimmer". These suburban spaces—or pre-suburban—seem to reflect and enforce the strict gender roles and behavioral scripts of post-war America. These are spaces which privilege conformity, emotional suppression and appearances over truth and authenticity. In all these three stories, women appear to be tied to domesticity and emotional labor, while men are

expected to be successful and emotionally contained breadwinners. The pressure to embody suburban ideals, however, results in an erasure of individuality and personal identity, turning homes and neighborhoods into stifling environments. Jim and Irene Westcott, Francis and Julia Weed, and Neddy Merrill all become alienated from both themselves and their communities, as they find themselves forced to perform roles that are ultimately incompatible with their human complexity. However, the alienation in Cheever's fiction is not simply a result from suburban monotony or expectations, but a deeply gendered experience. Both the reasons for and the consequences of these growing feelings of estrangement are different for female and male characters.

On the one hand, Cheever's female characters, such as Irene Westcott and Julia Weed, are all confined to the domestic sphere. Using Butler's lens, their gender is shown to be created through repeated behaviors surrounding motherhood, housework, and the expectation to be emotional caretakers. Even when suppressed from the center of the narrative—as with Lucinda Merril in "The Swimmer"—the invisible and unrecognized labour of women seem to be essential to the maintenance of suburban order. Expected to perform roles that suppress their individuality and emotional truth, Cheever's female characters inevitably feel isolated and unseen in this imprisoning domesticity. To cope with alienation, they turn to distractions. Irene becomes obsessed with the radio, while Julia becomes dependent on parties and social gatherings. These behaviors are compulsive but are also unconscious attempts to break out of their entrapping routines. However, they turn out to be unable to escape the suburban world of appearances and, instead, focus on seeking reassurance that their domestic labor has value—even if they do not enjoy it or feel fulfilled by it.

On the other hand, Cheever's male characters suffer from the unsustainable demands to suppress vulnerability and feelings at all times. Their performative roles as

breadwinners require rationality, control, and detachment, which isolates them from their families, but also from themselves. This emotional suppression often leads to both physical and verbal violence—such as Jim Westcott's outburst or Francis Weed striking his wife Julia. These characters are not able to engage emotionally with their surroundings—due to the stifling demands of suburban masculinity—and instead respond with frustration, accusations, or withdrawal. In "The Swimmer", however, Neddy Merrill does not reflect the frustration that comes from maintaining this performative role; but rather the effects of the failure of such a performance. Neddy's increasingly surreal journey through the pools of Bullet Park becomes an allegory of alcoholism and denial, the consequences of failing to conform to the rigid suburban ideals altogether. As his surroundings grow increasingly unfamiliar and hostile, Neddy becomes a figure gradually cast out from the community of Bullet Park. His alienation deepens to the point where evading reality through alcohol—and consequently losing his memory—becomes his only means of psychological survival. Cheever seems to suggest through Neddy that those individuals who fail to conform to suburban expectations risk being gradually cast out; and that the comfort and stability suburbia promises only last as long as one continues to perform the roles it demands.

Finally, it would be interesting to see if the conclusions drawn in this TFG continue to hold true when looking at the entirety of John Cheever's work. Thus, the continuation of this project could focus on analyzing how mid-century social expectations and gender norms operate in the author's narratives beyond the three stories selected for this study. In this way, it would be possible to observe and analyze the evolution of these patterns throughout his work. It would also be relevant to explore whether other characters reproduce or challenge the gender ideals imposed by the suburban context, and whether there are disruptions or transformations in these

representations. This would allow for a deeper understanding of how gender structures shape identity and contribute to alienation in Cheever's work.

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