

## INTRODUCTION



John Cheever

(1912-1982)

Disparaged or neglected during much of his career, John Cheever eventually achieved a degree of literary recognition and respect, both as novelist and as a writer of short stories, rivaled only by his friend Saul Bellow. Cheever was born in Quincy, Massachusetts, on May 27, 1912. The breakdown of his parents' marriage, coupled with his father's loss of self-esteem and his mother's growing independence, had a profound effect on the young Cheever. His expulsion from Thayer Academy in 1929 put an end to his formal education but started him on his way toward a literary career when *The New Republic* published his story "Expelled" the following year. Although Cheever served his literary apprenticeship during the Depression years, his writing, then and later, remained almost entirely free of the political themes that characterized the writing of so many of his contemporaries.

Fiction, Cheever liked to say, is the most exalted form of human communication, as indeed it is in his best works. He was equally insistent that it is not 'crypto-autobiography.' Here, however, Cheever was being less than honest, for while his stories and novels do not record his life per se, they do reflect the author's own obsessive doubts and desires, which he struggled so hard to keep from public view and which in the fiction he tended to treat in comic fashion (thus defusing its potential explosiveness). The surface of that fiction, like the gentlemanly pose Cheever liked to adopt when dealing with interviewers, formed a genial mask behind which lay the terrors of Cheever's world. The simple, highly readable surface of his seemingly realistic prose first lulls the reader into complacent acceptance and then suddenly slips to reveal the presence of a depth of fantasy and fear. His realistic depiction of his largely affluent, generally suburban characters is deceptive insofar as it masks the spiritual longings which they find so difficult to fulfill or even acknowledge in the modern age. Cheever treats his modern pilgrims with a mixture of comic affirmation and ironic skepticism as they and their author make their way toward the spiritual light. The characters share with Cheever the desire to "leech self-pity" out of their emotional spectrums, to overcome their dependency on alcohol and drugs, and to celebrate the world that lies before them, "like a stupendous dream."

Yet the affirmations do not come easily. Against the desire for transcendence and spiritual wholeness, Cheever posits the discontinuity of his characters' world, or, rather, the discontinuity of their relationship to that world and the similar discontinuity of the narratives in which he places them. Their affluence and social status prove precarious, and their lives are beset by a host of financial, psychological, and spiritual uncertainties. Driving around their well-kept communities or commuting to work, they suffer attacks of "otherness." Even in their jobs, communities, and homes they fell like "spiritual nomads" wandering the Westchester hills in search of some lost wholeness of being. Not surprising, many of them suffer the pangs of nostalgia, the most dread of all the ills in Cheever's fiction, for nostalgia turns one away from the world and the transcendent vision it embodies to a morbid fascination with one's past and one's self. The connection between self and world is neither linear nor logical; consequently, Cheever's fictions, both long

and short, follow no clearly causal line of plot development but instead make abundant use of narrative parallelism, intuitive leaps, and strange correspondences. It is a fiction less of logic than of magic--oddly so, given that Cheever has so often been read as a writer of conventional realist fiction.

The stories in Cheever's first book, *The Way Some People Live*, were realistic (written in imitation of Ernest Hemingway). *The Enormous Radio and Other Stories* evidences a groping toward a more personal style and vision, one in which the metamorphosis of the real into the fantastic, the factual into the psychological, has begun to play a decisive role, along with an inchoate interest in narrative form. In 1957 he published his first novel, *The Wapshot Chronicle*, which his more convention-minded reviewers denigrated as a mere collection of stories badly spliced together. The following year he published a third collection, *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill and Other Stories*, which had all the unity of a novel. More novels and more collections appeared before the appearance of "Cheever's triumph," the novel *Falconer*, in 1977, which, despite the shift in setting from suburb to prison, still deals with the typically Cheeveresque theme of confinement, both emotional and spiritual.

The success of *Falconer* led to the publication of the retrospective collection, *The Collected Stories of John Cheever* and the long-overdue recognition of Cheever as a major American writer. Just as important, *The Collected Stories of John Cheever* changed the way in which American reviewers and critics viewed the short story form: no longer as inferior to the novel, but as its equal. Cheever's career had especially suffered as a result of the supposed disparity. That he was a writer of stories, and worse, of stories which were published in *The New Yorker*, was, critics felt, a crippling limitation. Furthermore, that he should appear to be an apologist from the American middle class in an age of social activism and a realist in an age of innovation sealed his doom. Only toward the end of his career did the critics begin to reexamine Cheever's fiction and their own assumptions about it. Having overcome the narrowness of critical fashion and having exorcised his own personal demons, Cheever enjoyed a brief period of triumph before his death. He died of cancer on June 18, 1982, shortly after completing a truncated version of the "bulky novel" he had planned, *Oh What a Paradise It Seems*, a typically Cheeveresque combination of irony and affirmation."

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John Cheever and John Updike