

John Cheever Stories Part 1

by Paul Dean



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After a brief introduction to Cheever's life and the context of his writing career, this Bookmark and its sequel focus on six stories which exemplify a range of his gifts in the form. All quotations and page references are taken from Cheever's *Collected Stories and Other Writings* in the Library of America series, edited by Blake Bailey (2009).

'The short story', John Cheever wrote in 1978, 'is the literature of the nomad' (p.997). This is true of his own short stories both thematically (they often explore nomadism, physical, intellectual and spiritual) and structurally (they are often loosely episodic, a feature which provokes admiration in some readers and irritation in others). It was also true, in many respects, of Cheever's life and background. His mother was English, his father a travelling salesman, his elder brother Fred a drifter with whom his relationship was always uneasy. After an indifferent academic record at a succession of schools he quit full-time education at the age of seventeen, an episode which he dramatised in his first published story, 'Expelled' (1930). Meanwhile he took miscellaneous jobs — working in a department store, writing film scenarios for MGM, acting as a photographer's assistant, being a caretaker — and simultaneously developed his career as a writer, participating in the artists' colony at Yaddo, Saratoga Springs, where he would intermittently return over the years, and meeting other practitioners of the craft. Malcolm Cowley, who had taken 'Expelled' for *The New Republic*, was an important early mentor, advising Cheever to pare his stories down to a thousand words. In 1935 he sold 'Buffalo' to *The New Yorker*, which would become a regular outlet for his work.

Shuttling between Saratoga, Washington DC and New York, Cheever married Mary Winternitz in 1941. They had three children, but the marriage was unhappy. Alcoholism ran in Cheever's family: his mother and brother were both addicts, and he only managed to become teetotal in the last seven years of his life. His story 'The Sorrows of Gin' (1953) depicts a world of binging adults seen from a child's point of view; sickened by her father's drinking, and missing the kindly cook who he had dismissed for being drunk, Amy Lawton decides to run away. She tries to buy a one-way ticket to New York, and the station-master telephones her father, who comes to collect her, baffled as to why she should want to leave home:

Travel — and who knew better than a man who spent three days of every fortnight on the road — was a world of overheated plane cabins and repetitious magazines, where even the coffee, even the champagne, tasted of plastic. How could he teach her that home sweet home was the best place of all? (p. 253)

Cheever's own home was far from sweet. His drinking and his bisexuality, which led him to have clandestine affairs with other men, combined with his wife's emotional instability, created a tense and miserable domestic atmosphere. He also suffered from a variety of illnesses, many of them the by-products of drink. Throughout all this, nonetheless, he maintained a belief in his vocation to be a writer. Collections of stories appeared at regular intervals from the early 1940s onwards, and *The Stories of John Cheever* (1978), which brought together sixty-one of them, including some previously unpublished, was an immediate best-seller. Cheever's career as a novelist, by contrast, was more chequered. His first novel was rejected by the publishers who had commissioned it, and his second, *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957), took seventeen years to write. This was a commercial success, although his publisher's editor had earlier advised him, on the basis of a sample, to give up writing and find another source of income! A sequel, *The Wapshot Scandal*, appeared in

1964, although Cheever had no high opinion of it. There followed *Bullet Park* (1969), *Falconer* (1976) and the brief, novella-like *Oh What a Paradise It Seems*, published in 1982 only three months before Cheever's death from cancer at the age of seventy. Although his honorary degrees, membership of professional bodies, and literary prizes and awards made him an outwardly successful man, yet in his own mind he remained a deeply flawed and compromised figure.

The first story I want to look at provides a good introduction to Cheever's ideas about fiction as well as his practice.

The Day the Pig Fell into the Well (1954)

The Nudd family's summer holidays at their camp in the Adirondacks follow long-established rituals, chief among which is the recollection of 'the day the pig fell into the well'. This is a shared memory and everyone has a part to play, both in the incident and the narrating of it. Initially the story seems to evoke one of those slightly absurd experiences which, trivial in themselves, bind families together. Incidents are remembered affectionately, and details change over time, as oral narratives do, to reflect the changing status of the participants. Yet as Cheever's story proceeds, the gap between the halcyon day in question and the turbulent years that have followed becomes ever wider. There are disagreements, disappointments, betrayals and deaths. The annual recurrence of the holiday and the unchanging nature of the landscape contrast with the turbulent processes of modern American history, 'the boom, the crash, the depression, the recession, the malaise of imminent war, the war itself, the boom, the inflation, the recession, the slump' (p. 282). Mrs Nudd, the matriarch of the family, has a moment of terrible clarity as she faces the reality behind the rituals:

She squinted the tears out of her eyes. What had made the summer always an island, she thought; what had made it such a small island? What mistakes had they made? What had they done wrong? They had loved their neighbors, respected the force of modesty, held honor above gain. Then where had they lost their competence, their freedom, their greatness? Why should these good and gentle people who had surrounded her seem like the figures in a tragedy?

'Remember the day the pig fell into the well?' she asked. (p. 283)

She attempts to keep the abyss at bay by invoking the talismanic story, in which the others duly take their appointed roles. Afterwards Mrs Nudd feels comforted. But Cheever ends on an ominous note: 'The room with the people in it looked enduring and secure, although in the morning they would all be gone' (p. 284). The story becomes a meditation on the power of stories themselves, and on our need for them, both a positive need to sustain us and remind us of happier times, but also a negative one, to hide from us the appalling truths about ourselves. No story, however compelling, can save us from the fact of death.

The Swimmer (1964)

This is Cheever's most famous story. (It was made into a film in 1978, which he strongly disliked.) Again it is summer, a Sunday morning, and a group of friends are nursing their hangovers around the pool. Neddy Merrill decides to return to his house, eight miles away, via every swimming pool in friends' houses along the route. He does so as a tribute to the fine weather: 'The day was beautiful and it seemed to him that a long swim might enlarge and celebrate its beauty' (p. 727). But this is not his only reason. As he launches out, he pictures himself as 'a pilgrim, an explorer, a man with a destiny' (p. 727). Initially there is something charmingly absurd about this pose, but as the story develops it is disquietingly undermined.

The journey is not the triumphal progress he envisages, accompanied by 'friends all along the way' (p. 727). Sometimes, indeed, he meets the owners of the houses as he passes from pool to pool, and stops for a drink, but sometimes the houses are deserted. Coming upon a drained pool, he feels irrationally cheated. About halfway through the story, Cheever changes the camera-angle, as it were, and makes us see Neddy from outside, no longer a daring pioneer but a man in swimming trunks trying to cross a main road. Looking foolish, even pitiful, he endures the jeers of passing motorists and a beer-can is thrown at him. Yet he cannot turn back; his innocent lark has turned serious, its fulfilment a matter of honour. The weather, and the tone of the story, turn uneasy. His careless appropriation of his friends' houses is replaced by the regulations of a public swimming pool, and he is rebuked for not wearing an identification tag — a hint at his increasing loss of certainty about himself and his role. Arriving at the house of another couple, he is taken aback to be commiserated with on the 'misfortunes' which they say have befallen him and his children, but about which he knows nothing. He wonders if he is losing his memory. The sky suddenly darkens, even though it is midsummer. The company becomes disagreeable as he stops, first at the house of some coarse people who snub him, then at his ex-mistress's who sends him away coldly, saying when he tells her what he is doing, 'Good Christ. Will you ever grow up?' The self-appointed legendary figure is humiliated and belittled. Now it is night, and in the sky, completely unseasonably, are the autumn constellations. Confused, tired and frightened, Neddy cries. At the last pool he does not dive in but uses the steps. He seems to have lost even the ability to swim confidently. Finally arriving at his own house, he finds it locked, dark and empty.

This extraordinary story handles its symbolism with deceptive ease. Cheever himself said it was 'about the irreversibility of human conduct'. As Neddy swims home, time is compressed, our trust in the reliability of his point of view (the only one available) is weakened, and the superficially realist narrative mode takes on a quality of Kafkaesque nightmare. (Cheever acknowledged Kafka as an influence on his early story 'The Enormous Radio' [1947] in which a couple's new radio broadcasts their neighbours' quarrels and hatreds into their living-room.) Looking back, we notice the frequent references to the unreliability of Neddy's memory, his confusions about time and events. 'The only maps and charts he had to go by', Cheever remarks before he sets out, 'were remembered or imaginary but these were clear enough' (p. 727). Yet these psychological maps, the way we make sense of ourselves and our own lives, are far from clear by the end. The frightening thing the story shows is that we may lose our bearings without even realising the fact, and end up like Neddy, bewildered and alone.

The Jewels of the Cabots (1972)

Opinions vary about this late story, the last in *The Stories of John Cheever*. It was rejected by *The New Yorker* and eventually appeared in *Playboy*. Blake Bailey, Cheever's biographer, is perhaps right to call it 'a fascinating failure'. Yet for Cheever it marked an exciting technical departure, 'a new cadence', a change of key, pushing narrative digression and obliquity further than ever before in his work. The risk — which the story does not completely avoid — is that digressiveness will collapse into incoherence. Yet there are many remarkable moments. It is also a story in which Cheever, writing in the liberated 1970s, to some extent confronts his own sexuality, as he had done less explicitly in 'The World of Apples' (1966), about a poet whose idealism is tarnished by obscene fantasies.

The idea comes from a real-life scandal of Cheever's youth involving a family called Bradford. The change of name is important; 'Cabot', like 'Cheever', evokes the world of New England aristocracy. The Cheevers arrived in Boston in 1637 and the Cabots in Salem in 1700, where they rose to social eminence on the basis of a fortune made from the shipping business. However, Cheever's story deals, as its narrator says, with 'the wrong Cabots', a poorer and less respectable branch of the family, living in St Botolphs, the location of the *Wapshot* novels. The jewels of the title, which belong to Mrs Cabot, are stolen by her elder daughter

Geneva, who absconds to Egypt, converts to Islam and marries a nobleman with royal connections. Mrs Cabot, an outwardly virtuous woman who preaches temperance, murders her husband with graduated doses of arsenic, but escapes justice because the only person who knows the truth — Mr Cabot's mistress, by whom he has had a son — is advised by the local judge not to bring charges. Mr Cabot has left her and her boy a substantial legacy, he explains, and they surely don't want Mrs Cabot to contest the will.

The episode of the stolen jewels thus becomes one instance among many of the hypocrisy and tawdriness that lie beneath the superficial respectability of St Botolphs. Mrs Cabot conceals the existence of a child by a previous marriage who is a misshapen dwarf; other local families harbour insane or depraved members who are rarely or never seen; the narrator's mother, beneath her ladylike exterior, is revealed as anti-Semitic; a male prostitute called Doris plies his trade openly in the Commercial Hotel, 'exploiting the extraordinary moral lassitude of the place' (p. 828). Twenty-five psychiatrists have offices in the block where the narrator works.

Hardly less important in the story is the character of the narrator himself, who tells us that in his teenage years he had had an affair, 'the most gratifying and unself-conscious relationship I had known' (p. 824), with another boy at his school (as Cheever had done), and had later courted Molly, the younger Cabot sister, before marrying (to his mother's annoyance) a Jewish wife. A crucial moment in the story comes when the narrator informs us that we will look in vain in his account for 'discernible moral truths'. He will deal, not in truths, but in facts, and the facts about downtown St Botolphs are unedifying: 'The politics were neofascist, the factory was non-union, the food was unpalatable, and the night wind was bitter' (p. 828). However, we are also put on our guard about facts, which 'in that part of the world' tended to be presented 'crabwise' (p. 826). What unifies the story is not a tidily developing plot but the mind and memory of the narrator himself, and at its conclusion we see him visiting Geneva and her husband in Luxor. He does the obligatory tourist sites, but 'War was threatening — the air was full of Russian planes' (p. 834).

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Cheever's best stories have a virtue which he praised in Chekhov: a 'mastered irresolution'. There is an illusion of inconsequential meandering which turns out to be tightly controlled. Cheever was sometimes criticised in his lifetime for writing too much about the doings of the suburban middle class, but, as these stories suggest, that did not limit him to conventional slice-of-life realism. To a student of his at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, who was extolling the merits of avant-garde 'experimental' writing, he simply replied, 'All writing is experimental'.

RECOMMENDED READING

Blake Bailey, *Cheever: A Life* (2009), is the definitive biography. Cheever's daughter Susan published a memoir, *Home Before Dark* (1984), which has independent value. Cheever's own *Letters* (1989), and *Journals* (1991), both edited by his son Benjamin, contain illuminating material.

James E. O'Hara, *John Cheever: A Study of the Short Fiction* (1989) provides a comprehensive critical overview.

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