

John Cheever Stories Part 2

by Paul Dean



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This Bookmark forms a companion to 'John Cheever Stories: Part 1', in which a brief biographical outline may be found. As before, all quotations refer to the Library of America edition of Cheever's *Collected Stories and Other Writings*, by Blake Bailey (2009).

Part 1 examined three stories which illustrated Cheever's theme of nomadism; Part 2 looks at four stories about marriage. Cheever's own marriage was marked by tension resulting from his alcoholism and homosexual affairs, and many of his stories explore what he called 'my feeling of life as intense and profoundly broken relationships'.

The Season of Divorce (1950)

This early story, written in the first person, describes the gradual obsession of a married man, Dr Trencher, with the narrator's wife, Ethel. Trencher repeatedly sends her roses, phones without speaking when her husband answers, and eventually arrives at the house offering to marry her; the husband throws him out but he remains a disquieting presence around town. The narrator initially dismisses Trencher as a typical product of the modern city, 'full of accidental revelation, half-heard cries for help' (p. 168); then, as Ethel admits that she feels sorry for Trencher, the narrator worries that he will exploit this sympathy, and even declares 'I would rather have had her desire him than pity him' (p. 170). Cheever focuses on the new self-awareness that Trencher's devotion brings to Ethel, a graduate in French whose intellectual development has been blocked by the routines of marriage and motherhood. She feels transformed by this new attention, wondering whether her love for her husband and children is enough of a reason to stay with them, and poses the crucial question, 'Is divorce so dreadful and of all the things that hold a marriage together how many of them are good?' (p. 172). Yet when Trencher bursts in with his plea for her to leave her husband for him, she stays put. The domestic trivia, the rituals of shopping, cleaning, cooking and eating, resume as if nothing had happened.

Of course, something *has* happened. Trencher has awakened a new self-awareness in Ethel, who sees herself as a failure, her French forgotten; she is 'ashamed of my incompetence, ashamed of the way I look....I guess I love you, I love the children, but I love myself, my life, it has some value and some promise for me and Trencher's roses make me feel that I'm losing this, that I'm losing my self-respect' (pp. 172–3). Her husband says he doesn't understand this; for him, she is simply fulfilling her allotted role in the marriage. By making him rather than Ethel narrate the story, Cheever highlights the distance between them. (Similarly, Trencher's attachment to Ethel is merely stated as a fact; the motivating psychology behind it is never explored.) There is a moment on a chilly midwinter day in 'the season of divorce' (p. 173) when he fears for his marriage and recalls happier times, but cannot say any of this to his wife. When he discovers her crying in the middle of the night, she denies that this is because of Trencher, attributing her distress to a series of upsetting incidents from the past, some more traumatic than others: her mother's death; her father's marriage to someone she detested; her having to wear a second-hand dress to a party twenty years earlier; simple tiredness. This may seem a ludicrous mixture, but the point is that for both of them the episode has catalysed feelings that are too difficult to explain explicitly.

How do we see the resumption of 'ordinary' life at the end of the story? Does it point to a triumph of marital fidelity or a failure to recognise when a relationship has run its course? Is Ethel brave in her decision not to break up the home, or scared of new experience? Yet how much of a change would Trencher offer? His obsessiveness, his assumption that he can

simply take possession of Ethel, are more than a little disturbing. 'I'm not romantic', he tells the narrator. 'I'm matter-of-fact...I'm hardheaded' (p. 174). These do not seem good omens. Cheever invites us to reflect on how far sudden painful revelations about ourselves can be accepted without fracturing our whole emotional life.

The Country Husband (1954)

Cheever was so excited when he finished this story that he delivered it in person to his editor, who was ill in bed, and demanded that he read it immediately. It has some thematic similarities to 'The Season of Divorce'. Here, too, a marriage is under threat as Francis Weed becomes obsessed with Anne Murchison, his pretty young babysitter, and feels the urge to break the taboos of the suburb of Shady Hill, where 'there was no turpitude; there had not been a divorce since he had lived there; there had not even been a breath of scandal' (p. 405). Cheever repeatedly stresses the emotionally stunting effects of such respectability. Francis's wife, Julia, and his young children are too preoccupied to hear how he nearly died when his plane had to make an emergency landing; his rudeness to Mrs Wrightson, a tedious but influential society lady, threatens to make social pariahs of the family; when he recognises the maid at a dinner-party as a woman he had seen stripped and humiliated as a Nazi collaborator in post-war France, he keeps silent, since 'the people in the Farquarsons' living room seemed united in their tacit claim that there had been no past, no war — that there was no danger or trouble in the world' (p. 400). Suburbia does not want to think too much — or at all.

Francis's love for Anne promises to liberate him from all this, to give him 'a relationship to the world that was mysterious and enticing' (p. 403). Yet the exaltation is short-lived. The 'affair' amounts to a few shared kisses and a passionate letter that Francis never sends. He becomes increasingly aware of 'the abyss between his fantasy and the practical world' (p. 408). Francis's diagnosis of Shady Hill is shared by Clayton Thomas, a young college boy, desperate to leave what he sees as a place with no future, its inhabitants enslaved to the commuter train and empty party-going. 'I think people ought to be able to dream big dreams about the future', he says (p. 409), and Francis is doing just that, at least until he learns that Clayton is engaged to Anne. In revenge, he refuses to use his influence to get Clayton a job. Ironically, Clayton has correctly understood and evaluated the Weeds' life; irritation at this may be another factor behind Francis's enmity to him.

Things come to a crisis when the Weeds quarrel furiously, Julia threatening to leave and insisting that Francis has ceased to love her. His behaviour towards Mrs Wrightson has imperilled their standing in the community; Julia accuses him of 'stupid thoughtlessness' and childishness (p. 411) and predicts that he won't be able to manage without her. Although the quarrel is made up, Francis remains captive to his fantasies of Anne. He realises he is at a turning-point, with all his familiar support systems gone; in danger of becoming morally and psychologically adrift: 'the feeling of bleakness was intolerable' (p. 415). He turns to a psychiatrist, ashamed at having to forsake 'the perfect loneliness in which he had made his most vital decisions' (p. 216). This is a key sentence; isolation is at the heart, not only of the Weeds' marriage, but of the ersatz 'community' model which suburbia desperately projects of itself. There is no real sympathy or sense of responsibility for others.

There is a jump of ten days as we approach the ending of the story. Anne and Clayton have disappeared from the narrative and we never learn whether they eventually married or whether Clayton found a job. A new perspective of Shady Hill is now held out: 'the village hangs, morally and economically, from a thread; but it hangs by its thread in the evening light'. Cheever evokes the familiar routines of the street with a new note of amused, even affectionate, tolerance. There is a lurch of tone, however. Amid the sounds from his neighbours' houses, Francis is in his cellar, building a coffee-table — that perfect symbol of socialising — following his doctor's suggestion that woodwork will prove therapeutic. The shortest and flattest sentence in the story comes next: 'Francis is happy'. There is every

reason to think that he is nothing of the kind, that he has rejected his vision and become a timid conformist. Yet Cheever chooses to end the story, not with this defeat, but with a reminder of what has been lost, as Jupiter, the scavenging dog whose depredations have earlier been mentioned, comes capering through the garden chewing someone's slipper. 'Then it is dark', Cheever writes; 'it is a night where kings in golden suits ride elephants over the mountains'. Such gorgeous fantasies are closed forever to Francis; he has not even as much freedom and *joie de vivre* as a stray dog.

Vladimir Nabokov praised 'The Country Husband' as 'a miniature novel beautifully traced'. It is a superb story whose complex texture resists neat summary. Again we are challenged to wonder how any satisfying emotional life can be maintained in the face of the pressure to conform. Moral decision-making inevitably involves others besides ourselves; how far must we limit our capacity to dream in order to meet our responsibilities? How do we tell whether our feelings are grounded in truth or escapist fantasies? How do we create a society when we feel imprisoned by inner loneliness? Even if we can break out of that, is society worth the sacrifice of the self? These are questions with which Cheever himself wrestled frequently; rarely does he dramatise them as powerfully as here.

An Educated American Woman (1963)

This story and the slightly later 'The Ocean' (1964) are controversial in Cheever's work because of their thinly-veiled hostile portrayals of his wife Mary. The 'educated American woman' of the title, Jill Chidchester Madison (a Founding Father surname) has married beneath her, intellectually speaking, as is made clear when her shipyard worker fiancé, Georgie, is asked whether he likes Thackeray; he replies that he has never tasted any (p. 629). Jill's mother is a domineering and utterly selfish woman; she herself is a brilliant student whose work on her biography of Flaubert (a novelist Cheever admired) and campaigning for civic good causes mean that Georgie has to do the housework and shoulder much of the care of their four-year-old-son, Bibber, whom he adores. An assortment of servants and babysitters helps with the chores that Jill has been brought up to consider too lowly for someone of her intelligence: 'Housework simply isn't my style' (p. 634). Watching Georgie, wearing an apron, cleaning the silver one night, she wonders whether he can be a real man if he is content to do such things:

Did he like to wear an apron? Was he a transvestite? And was she aberrant herself? But this was inadmissible, and equally inadmissible was the reasoning that would bring her to see that he polished silver because he was forced to. (p. 635)

Later, when they are in bed, when Georgie may be expecting to make love, she absent-mindedly quotes from *Madame Bovary* in French — a neat sardonic twist, as Emma Bovary's emotional life is largely parasitic upon fantasies derived from her reading of cheap romance novels. This throws Georgie into a rage, which she attributes to old-fashioned sexist jealousy at her having had an education. (We recall the story's date, the early 1960s, when feminism was emerging as a powerful social force in the western world.)

While Jill is away in Europe, acting as a tour guide, Bibber is sent to summer camp, where he is miserable and homesick. Georgie visits him there, and is shocked to find how ramshackle the camp is, how poor the facilities compared to those he recalls from his own boyhood. In contrast to this is the splendour of Venice, where he joins Jill for a brief holiday, but she insists on lecturing to him about the churches and the paintings, again ramming home her superior understanding. On return to America, he takes a mistress, a woman he meets casually while doing his Christmas shopping. When Jill finds a discarded draft of a letter he has written ending the affair, she refuses to believe in it: 'I think you've made the whole thing up to try and hurt me. ...My advice to you, old chap, is never to embark on anything that

counts on a powerful imagination' (p. 640). Of course, it is the limitations of *her* imagination that are exposed here.

Now very unstable, the relationship between Jill and Georgie implodes completely when Bibber falls ill and, deserted by his babysitter who is called away to help her parents on a day when neither Jill nor Georgie is at home, develops a high fever which turns to pneumonia and proves fatal. Jill's mother, in Italy, refuses to come back for the funeral out of sheer selfishness and cowardice ('I have come to a time of life when I do not especially like to dwell upon the subject of passing away', p. 643) and repulses Jill's suggestion of a visit to her. Georgie blames Jill for Bibber's death, and they divorce.

At this point in something unexpected happens to the narration. We have almost forgotten the single occurrence of an 'I' in the second paragraph, and have read on as though the story were being told in the third person — certainly an omniscient point of view seems to be adopted, which claims privileged insight into the characters' thoughts and feelings. Now, however, the 'I' enters the story once more, recounting a phone call from Georgie, railing against women and suggesting a meeting for lunch. To our astonishment the narrator remarks, 'I thought then how inferior he was to Jill, how immature'. Georgie gives the narrator a whole host of contact telephone numbers, which the narrator writes down, but 'when we said goodbye I dropped the paper into a wastebasket' (p. 644).

Several puzzling issues are raised by this ending. We have been given no evidence that Georgie is immature or inferior to Jill, rather the reverse. His blaming her for Bibber's death is judged 'cruel and unreasonable'; does that seem excessive? We begin to distrust the narrator's judgement. We also find his callousness about Georgie distasteful. In retrospect, this threatens to destabilise the entire story. Yet we cannot but feel that the narrative has been trustworthy, giving a fair-minded picture of Jill and Georgie up to the very end. Our assumptions about interpretation are under question, and there is no easy answer. Some may see this as a brilliant technical move on Cheever's part, while others may dismiss it as a rather cheap trick.

Interestingly, we have Mary Cheever's reaction to the publication of 'An Educated American Woman'. She told Cheever, 'It was wicked of you to kill the child', suggesting he was indulging a feeling of gratuitous cruelty, not just towards Bibber but, by implication, towards her also. Some details about Jill and the marriage have a foundation in fact, and could be recognised by those who knew the couple. It is pleasant to know that, despite all the rows and painful episodes, the marriage survived, unlike so many in Cheever's work, and that its later years were comparatively calm and happy.

The Worm in the Apple (1958)

This story will be mentioned only briefly, but it has an interesting part to play in Cheever's work. Uniquely, it was written specifically to be included in a volume of Cheever's stories (*The Housebreaker of Shady Hill*, 1958) without having appeared in a magazine first. In just four and a half pages (a very short piece for him), Cheever depicts the Crutchmans, a couple so apparently happy that everyone suspects there must be a dark side to their marriage. There must, surely, be a worm in the apple! Mrs Crutchman is rich; why doesn't her husband feel humiliated and take to drink? They are active in community service; what are they trying to atone for? Their children seem not to hate them; what deceptions are they practising in secret? So the ironical imagining of disasters — Cheever's notes, as it were, of ways the story might have been handled — piles up, until finally the awful truth dawns that 'one might wonder if the worm was not in the eye of the observer' (p. 347). Even old age brings only blessings to the couple; they become fond grandparents, their health remains excellent, and their investments make them richer. Naturally, this is not a major story, but the element of self-parody by Cheever makes it beguilingly mischievous and a good antidote to his more

characteristic depiction of marriage. For once, the middle-class way of life has proved its worth.

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Cheever's last public appearance was at Carnegie Hall less than two months before his death. He was to receive the National Medal for Literature. To an audience shocked by the deterioration in his physical appearance caused by cancer, he spoke these words:

For me, a page of good prose is where one hears the rain...A page of good prose is when one hears the noise of battle...A page of good prose remains invincible.

By that standard, John Cheever lives on undefeated.

RECOMMENDED READING

Blake Bailey, *Cheever: A Life* (2000), 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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