

Suburban Studies Group: 'The Swimmer' Roundtable discussion 24 October 2013.

Report by Dr Alan Kaufman

John Cheever's story "The Swimmer" appeared in the *New Yorker* magazine on July 18, 1964. It is set probably in one of the affluent suburbs of Westchester County, NY, where Cheever was living (specifically, he was residing in Ossining). In the story the protagonist, Neddy Merrill, is going home from a party on a summer Sunday afternoon, and he decides to proceed entirely by swimming the length of a series of neighbors' pools.

A discussion of this well-known Cheever story took place at Bergen Community College on October 24, 2013, sponsored by Bergen's Suburban Studies Program. Suburban Studies is an integral academic program at the college, situated in the town of Paramus, in Bergen County, New Jersey—itself a suburb of New York City. The discussion centered around two basic questions: In what ways is "The Swimmer" a story about suburban life, and what commentary is Cheever offering, in his story, about suburban life?

The audience for this discussion was made up of Bergen faculty, students, and members of the college administration. The conversation was lively, the audience actively engaged by this complex story. In the course of a little more than one-hour, the attendees noted the affluence of the story's setting, the presence of a swimming pool in every member's backyard, the amount of drinking taking place on this Sunday afternoon, the way in which the mood of the story darkened, as did the weather, as Cheever proceeded with his short narrative. Discussion for a time centered on the vapidness of affluent suburban life, as vividly portrayed by Cheever.

Discussion was not limited to the two central questions, however. The participants also talked about the effective characterization of Neddy Merrill, a man whose life has fallen apart, which becomes clear as the story proceeds. Another subject of discussion was the issue of masculinity, how his role affected Neddy, and whether or not issues of masculinity had an impact on the story's attitude toward the subject of personal happiness or fulfillment. A considerable amount of discussion centered on Cheever's use of chronology and the story's realism, or lack of realism. One of the most commented on features of "The Swimmer" is that of its realism: by the end of the story, it has become evident that Neddy has lost his home, his family, and most likely his affluence. The story opens either at a party that Neddy has imagined or one that he is recalling. The participants seemed in agreement that the story was, to some degree, driven by what appears to have been Neddy's delusional state—perhaps brought on by his excessive drinking, perhaps by the despair that may have been a result of his misfortunes.

As with any productive discussion of a work of literature, especially one as complex as "The Swimmer," the participants concluded a lively and enjoyable hour with more questions than answers about Cheever's story. This is a sign of the success of the discussion.