

The Pool as Page

Short Story Form, Fluid Symbolism and Existential Drift in John Cheever's "The Swimmer"

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Abstract

This essay offers a critical analysis of John Cheever's "The Swimmer" (1964), proposing a conceptual frame that establishes a structural isomorphism between the acts of swimming and writing. Both are construed as disciplined, rhythmically regulated practices that demand a delicate balance between instinct and control, sustaining narrative continuity even as moments of disruption emerge, and moving between sensory immersion and reflective detachment.

The analysis situates Cheever's narrative within the broader tradition of the short story, conceptualizing the form as a pliant formal apparatus uniquely attuned to articulating the fleeting, and disjunctive qualities of twentieth-century subjectivity, as well as the epistemological instabilities of contemporary experience.

Within this framework, swimming is approached simultaneously as lived, embodied practice and as a symbolic and structural device. The protagonist's aquatic journey is thus examined not only as a physical undertaking, but also as a stratified narrative operation through which existential dislocation, mnemonic drift, and the fluidity of identity are staged. Water – at once an emblematic motif and an immersive setting – emerges as a liminal space onto which individual memory and collective cultural tensions are projected, particularly those rooted within the ideological topographies of postwar American suburbia.

All good writing is swimming underwater and holding your breath.

(Francis Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack Up*)

The image proposed by Francis Scott Fitzgerald and here employed as the opening epigraph captures a central tension underpinning the writerly gesture: the dialectic between the necessity of immersive descent into narrative depth and the countervailing demand to transmute that immersion into a coherent and formally delimited structure. In this light, the image provides a critical framework for reading John Cheever's 1964 short story "The Swimmer," a text that dramatizes this oscillation through its very narrative logic.

In Cheever's case, the short story form enables a narrative economy capable of condensing, within a deliberately limited temporal and spatial frame, the experiential fragmentation and existential unease characteristic of postwar American subjectivity. The short story thus emerges as a privileged locus for negotiating the tensions between continuity and rupture, immersion and formal containment, that structure modern narrative experience.

"The Swimmer" stands as a paradigmatic instance of these dynamics. The swimmer's gesture takes on a symbolic dimension, intricately interwoven with the story's structure, rhythm, and themes. The protagonist's passage through a succession of suburban swimming pools unfolds not merely as a physical itinerary, but as the progressive revelation of an allegorical dimension, in which the spaces he crosses mirror his inner state and water becomes a mediating element between consciousness and dissolution. These pools, scattered along a path that appears linear yet is secretly fragmented, function as ambiguous and unsettling nodes of meaning through which reality is disclosed in forms of refraction and disorientation.

The essay adopts a dual analytical perspective that interweaves a phenomenological approach to swimming, understood as an embodied practice defined by rhythm, repetition, and sensory immersion, with an analysis of swimming pools as culturally and socially encoded spaces emblematic of a specific suburban imaginary. From this standpoint, each pool is initially encountered by the moving body – in immersion, emergence, and transit – before acquiring symbolic resonance. These two dimensions are accordingly conceived as mutually constitutive: the swimmer's gestures find their structural and symbolic articulation within the regulated, domesticated space of the pools, where individual lived reality is inseparable from its sociocultural inscription. On this basis, the cultural and ideological meanings of the swimming pools emerge in part, though not exclusively, from the swimmer's embodied experience. The controlled waters of suburbia – bounded, chlorinated, and privately owned – acquire symbolic force precisely insofar as they mediate bodily movement, enforcing rhythms of access and exclusion.

Considering this dual perspective, the interpretive hypothesis advanced in this essay posits a structural parallel between swimming and writing. As the swimmer negotiates the flow of water and the symbolic landscape of the pools, balancing immersive engagement with the awareness of the spatial and temporal structure of his journey, the writer navigates the currents of narrative, shaping rhythm and form while simultaneously articulating the relationship between individual experience and social context, transforming lived immediacy and social intelligibility. Writing thus emerges as a dimensional reconfiguration: a movement from the flat surface of inscription to the volumetric density of experience, a process that, as Brad Leithauser observes of Cheever, is "forever emerging from two dimensions into three, from the rectangle of the page into the cubic complexities of actual life" (Leithauser 2012).

Through this formal negotiation, Cheever's text stages the protagonist's existential dislocation, mnemonic drift, and the precariousness of identity, rendering swimming a structuring metaphor for the intertwined dynamics of belonging and identity-negotiation. Water, in turn, operates as a refractive surface, both reflecting and distorting the individual and collective cultural anxieties embedded in the sociocultural imaginary of postwar American suburbia.

1. Immersive gestures: swimming and the architecture of the short story

Before immersing ourselves in the chlorinated, liquid pleasures that flow through the pages of Cheever's story, it is worth pausing for a brief preliminary reflection – an invitation to linger on the surface and consider the unexpected affinities between the practices of swimming and short story writing.

Though these two activities may at first seem to inhabit distant, unconnected spheres – one grounded in physical exertion, the other in linguistic composition – a closer examination reveals a constellation of striking conceptual correspondences. Both disciplines are governed by an economy of gesture: an essential concision that demands full presence in the *hic et nunc*, privileging precision over excess, and intensity over duration. Each unfolds through a choreography of rhythm and restraint – swimming, as the negotiation of fluid resistance through calibrated movement, the short story, as the navigation of narrative tension within the formal strictures of brevity. Despite their differing media, they are united by a common aspiration: swimming pursues a tangible, physical destination, while the short story endeavors to evoke an emotion or provoke a sudden yet profound insight.

One of the most compelling parallels between the short story and swimming lies in their reliance on rhythm. It must be acknowledged, however, that rhythm is by no means exclusive to either discipline. Numerous activities – from dance and artistic gymnastics to musical performance and team sports – depend upon coordinated synchronism and temporal regulation, as do other endurance disciplines requiring sustained rhythmic control.

Yet swimming occupies a singular position in this constellation of rhythmic practices. Unlike terrestrial activities, it unfolds within a medium that is fluid, unstable, and resistant, compelling the subject to negotiate rhythm as the very condition of possibility for movement itself. As Roger Deakin observes, “Rhythm is one of the principal pleasures of swimming, as well as its essence” (2000, 207): without rhythmic control, fluidity is lost, resistance intensifies, and water itself is experienced as hostile rather than sustaining. What swimming makes experientially explicit – namely, the necessity of sustaining orientation and forward motion through a continuous adjustment of tempo, effort, and pause within a resistant medium – finds

a structural counterpart in literary narration. In the short story in particular, rhythm governs the reader's progression through the text by orchestrating the distribution of tension, the timing of revelation, and the alternation between descriptive density and ellipsis. Just as the swimmer's loss of rhythmic control results in increased resistance and a diminished capacity for movement and buoyancy, a disruption of narrative rhythm in the short story risks dissipating affective intensity and compromising the coherence of the reading experience.

Rhythm has long occupied a central place within literary theory and criticism, extending far beyond the confines of the short story. From Edgar Allan Poe to later studies such as Edward Killoran Brown's *Rhythm in the Novel* (1950), narrative rhythm has been recognized as a fundamental structuring principle across genres. Yet while rhythm permeates all narrative forms, it assumes a particular urgency within the short story. Unlike the novel – where digression, descriptive expansion, and temporal slack are structurally permissible – the short story operates within a compressed temporal frame that allows little dispersion. Its rhythm is therefore typically tighter, marked by rapid narrative condensation, incisive dialogue, and a heightened focus on the climax.

It is at this juncture that the analogy with swimming acquires its full explanatory force. Both unfold rhythmically through an interplay of propulsion and pause, of submersion and re-emergence, in a constant negotiation between control and release. Within the measured cadence of strokes and sentence breaks alike, rhythm emerges not merely as a structural framework but as an elusive presence that permeates the very essence of creation. As Jacques Derrida famously observed, rhythm – and the very concept of rhythm – “has always haunted our tradition, without ever reaching the center of its concerns” (1998, 33). This persistent marginality is not accidental. Rhythm resists assimilation into a metaphysical tradition that privileges stable origins, fixed centers, and points of presence; a tradition that, as Derrida notes, has persistently sought anchorage in a center conceived as “a point of presence, a fixed origin” (1978, 278). By its very nature, rhythm eludes such fixity. It configures itself as a phenomenon in perpetual becoming, articulated through shifting relations of presence and absence, as well as continuity and rupture. Repetition, in this framework, does not entail the mechanical return of the identical; rather, it operates as an iterative process through which difference is continuously produced. Each recurrence introduces a minimal displacement, a variation that alters the temporal and affective configuration in which it appears. This constitutive decentering prevents rhythm from being reduced to a stable point of origin and instead reveals it as a fluid movement, a ceaseless modulation of becoming.

This understanding of rhythm finds a rigorous theoretical articulation in Gilles Deleuze's philosophy, most notably *Difference and Repetition* (1968), a work crucial for elucidating the non-linear and uneven temporality implicitly at stake in the preceding analysis. For Deleuze,

repetition cannot be reduced to the recurrence of identical units; it designates instead the very process through which difference is produced and sustained. As he insists, it is necessary to distinguish between a “static repetition” and a “dynamic repetition,” akin to “the ‘evolution’ of a bodily movement, [...] incorporat[ing internal difference] in each of its moments” (Deleuze 1994, 20). Rhythm belongs unequivocally to this second order. Deleuze’s analysis of rhythm displaces any conception grounded in homogeneous metric division. Cadence, he argues, is merely “the envelope of a rhythm” (1994, 12), whereas rhythm itself emerges from intensities that introduce inequality and incommensurability within metrically equivalent intervals (1994, 23). Tonic accents do not recur at regular moments; rather, they generate privileged instants, producing a polyrhythmic temporality structured through contractions and dilations. Time is thus experienced not as linear succession but as a field of differential tensions that simultaneously reshape the perception of space.

The exemplary figure of swimming, explicitly invoked in *Difference and Repetition*, renders this logic palpable. Learning to swim does not consist in reproducing a pre-given movement, but in entering into a differential relation with the water, synchronizing breath and gesture with variable rhythms. As Deleuze writes, what matters “is not the movement itself, but the process according to which it has been carried out” (1994, 23). Swimming thus becomes a mode of “learning signs,” a corporeal attunement to forces and intensities rather than the execution of a fixed form. In this sense, rhythm appears as a practice of becoming: a dynamic repetition that continually displaces itself, resisting stabilization and center. Deleuze’s account therefore converges with Derrida’s insistence on rhythm’s marginal yet persistent role within metaphysical discourse, revealing it as a generative principle through which temporality, embodiment, and meaning are ceaselessly reconfigured.

When translated into narratological terms, such a conception of rhythm – understood through Derrida’s insistence on its structural decentering and Deleuze’s account of repetition as the production of difference – proves particularly suggestive for thinking about the short story. The brevity and narrative economy that define the form coexist with ellipses, temporal fractures, and abrupt shifts in perspective, producing a rhythmic organization that is never fully stabilized. In this sense, rhythm operates as a conceptual clarification of how repetition, difference, and intensity structure narrative experience. Much like swimming – whose strokes carve provisional trajectories within a fluid medium – the short story unfolds through rhythmic gestures that momentarily establish patterns of meaning, only to suspend or dissolve them through silence, omission, or sudden reconfiguration.

The pivotal role of rhythm in shaping narrative tension, structural coherence, and affective efficacy emerges as a recurrent concern within critical discourse on the genre. Particularly illustrative, in this respect, is the contribution of Edgar Allan Poe who, in his famous review of

Hawthorne's "Twice-Told Tales" (1842) and in his seminal essay "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846), articulates the doctrine of the "unity of effect," a principle whereby every constituent element of the short story must converge toward the production of a singular, intense, and irreproducible emotional outcome. Within this theoretical framework, rhythm assumes the status of an indispensable narrative mechanism: it serves to sustain the reader's engagement through a *brevitas* that imposes upon the text a quasi-musical cadence, orchestrated through iterative deployment of imagery, syntactic modulation, and lexicon imbued with pronounced semantic resonance.

In a more contemporary context, Frank O'Connor's *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (1962) foregrounds rhythm as a principle inherited from oral narration and reconfigured within the written short story. Rather than privileging plot progression, O'Connor emphasizes cadence, tonal modulation, and narrative hesitation as structuring devices. Rhythm, in this account, is produced through controlled pauses, deferred articulation, and the strategic use of silence, aligning the twentieth-century short story with a longstanding poetics of implication in which significance emerges as much from what is withheld as from what is explicitly articulated.

This conception finds further elaboration in Charles E. May's *The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice* (2002), where rhythm is understood as a structuring principle rooted in the oscillation between mimetic immediacy and the reader's awareness of fiction as artifice. Rather than operating primarily at the auditory level, rhythm in May's account is temporal and semantic, generated through a recurrent movement between surface realism and symbolic patterning. Through repetition, variation, and parallelism, narrative details acquire coherence and intensity not through linear progression but through rhythmic return, revealing a latent order beneath the apparent fragmentation of experience.

This emphasis on repetition as a generative, rather than mechanical, principle is further clarified by Michael Toolan's *Making Sense of Narrative Text: Situation, Repetition, and Picturing in the Reading of Short Stories* (2016), which challenges the assumption that repetition necessarily entails monotony or redundancy. For Toolan, repetition functions as a foundational mechanism of textual coherence and readerly engagement, enabling variation, patterning, and aesthetic innovation. Recurrent elements – whether lexical, structural, or thematic – thus contribute to the interpretive density and affective resonance of the short story, reinforcing rhythm as a mode of symbolic organization rather than a mere formal device.

Narrative rhythm – whether articulated through leitmotifs, lexical iteration, or the temporal spacing of events interspersed with deliberate pauses – thus constitutes a complex compositional dynamic, demanding a finely calibrated balance between acceleration and suspension. This dynamic, analogous to the corporeal rhythm of swimming – where measured

sequences of strokes and breaths alternate in a harmonious cadence – produces an experiential continuum in which motion and stillness are held in productive tension.

Within the economy of the short story, such modulation assumes a function of paramount significance. It governs the reader's temporal and affective engagement, enabling the gradual emergence of the story's central intuition, an often-ineffable insight that the brevity of the form paradoxically intensifies. An excessively rapid tempo may foreclose the possibility of immersive reading, inhibiting the reader's attunement to the narrative's emotional and conceptual modulations. Conversely, excessive deceleration may dissipate affective concentration, diminishing the story's impact before the culmination of its narrative arc.

The modulation of rhythm acquires a particularly tangible form in the embodied practice of swimming, where the calibration of each stroke responds to resistance, duration, and distance. As Carola Barbero observes: "L'acqua come flusso rende bene l'idea della costanza e del ritmo che il nuotatore fa propria. Una bracciata, un'altra, la terza, respiro" (2023, 17).¹ Repetition articulates itself as a calibrated inscription within temporal duration.

Within this framework, the analogy between swimming and the writing of the short story proves remarkably fertile. Just as the swimmer's strokes demand a precise coordination between the movement of limbs and the measured control of breath to preserve momentum and direction, so does the short story require the careful orchestration of its constitutive elements – plot, character, setting, and theme. These components must be meticulously interwoven, harmonized, and synchronized to achieve narrative coherence. Each "stroke," whether in water or on the page, constitutes a small yet essential motion toward the completion of a broader trajectory: an act which, while seemingly autonomous, contributes to the articulation of a fluid and organic design.

Such fluidity, however, is sustained only through a conscious attentiveness to narrative temporality and the meticulous calibration of interactions among the story's various components, eschewing, for instance, any disproportionate emphasis on incidental detail that might encumber the narrative economy. This sensitivity to temporal structure – evoked in the very notion of 'narrative time' – naturally invites a further parallel between swimming and the short story, one that elegantly seals this meditation on literary rhythm and flow.

Both activities are intrinsically ephemeral. Swimming, as a temporal phenomenon, is transitory: one enters the water, swims for some time, and ultimately emerges, transformed, if only provisionally, by the immersion. Likewise, the short story constitutes a brief yet concentrated aesthetic encounter: a form that, despite its economy of scale, amplifies affective

¹ "Water as flow aptly conveys the idea of constancy and rhythm that the swimmer internalizes. One stroke, another, a third, inhale" (my translation).

and cognitive intensity through its very concision. In both instances, what remains is a lasting impression: a sense of fullness, of reflective clarity, or an emotional reverberation that transcends the brevity of its enactment.

This emphasis on temporal compression and the reader's focused engagement inevitably invokes Edgar Allan Poe's seminal reflections on the essence and function of the short story. Poe's acute awareness of the rapidly evolving socio-cultural landscape of his time led him to envision a literary form capable of responding to the accelerated rhythms of modern life. In a society increasingly driven by mercantile imperatives and marked by the fragmentation of attention, readers could no longer indulge in extended immersion within a single text. Consequently, the temporality and rhythm of literary consumption demanded transformation, adapting to emergent socio-economic paradigms. With remarkable critical foresight, Poe discerned the necessity for a compact yet intense narrative mode – one capable of delivering both aesthetic and intellectual intensity within the confines of a brief reading experience. He thus articulated a poetics of the short story finely calibrated to the temporal and attentional constraints of a readership, as Andrew Levy aptly puts it, “too busy to pay more than passing attention to art and literature” (1993, 24).

2. Short strokes: John Cheever in the waters of short fiction

The analogy between swimming and writing, hitherto explored primarily from a theoretical and formal lens, proves particularly illuminating when applied to Cheever's “The Swimmer,” a narrative written by an author for whom swimming was a lived, habitual practice. As Blake Bailey notes, Cheever displayed a characteristic predilection for “swimming from one pool to the next” (2009), a seemingly anecdotal biographical detail that uncannily anticipates the existential trajectory of Neddy Merrill, the story's protagonist, across a fragmented suburban topography of private and public pools. Cheever's intimate familiarity with the corporeal, temporal, and rhythmic demands of swimming therefore invites a sustained examination of the distinctive architectural principles governing his short fiction in general, and “The Swimmer” in particular.

This analogy acquires further resonance when read alongside Carola Barbero's reflections on swimming as an existential practice. Barbero identifies “The Swimmer” as a paradigmatic case, insofar as swimming in the story is portrayed “non come semplice sport ma come pratica che consente di riflettere su diversi aspetti dell'esistenza”² (Cellotto 2016). From this perspective, the aquatic dimension assumes a symbolic charge, with swimming operating as a figurative

² “[N]ot as a mere sport, but as a practice through which various dimensions of existence may be contemplated” (my translation).

modality through which the layered depths of memory, temporality, and identity may be engaged.

Yet, before fully diving into this symbolic dimension, it is necessary to undertake a sequence of analytical “strokes” that move, first, toward a broader reflection on Cheever’s engagement with the short story as a dynamic and experimental literary form, and then toward a more focused reading of “The Swimmer,” elucidating the compelling resonance between swimming and short fiction outlined above. The significance of this initial, broader critical reflection becomes particularly evident when considering “The Swimmer” itself – first published in *The New Yorker* on July 18, 1964, and now widely regarded as one of Cheever’s most emblematic and frequently anthologized short stories – whose canonical status foregrounds the centrality of the short story form within his oeuvre.

Cheever’s relationship with the short story, however, was far from unproblematic. It was instead marked by a persistent sense of frustration rooted in the economic necessity of writing short fiction as a means of subsistence – a predicament shared by many practitioners of the genre. Particularly revealing of this inner conflict is a letter Cheever addressed to his friend John Weaver on February 24, 1947, in which he wrote: “I got back to work on the book about a month ago, but was dealt some crushing financial blows three weeks later and now I’m back in the short story business. I want to write short stories like I want to fuck a chicken” (Cheever B. 1988, 125). Through this deliberately grotesque image, Cheever not only conveys his disillusionment with the short story form but also reveals the precarious balance between artistic vocation and economic survival. What emerges, then, is a frustration that did not ultimately prevent him from achieving recognition as one of the foremost practitioners of twentieth-century short fiction. Indeed, the bitter awareness articulated in this letter would soon give way to a remarkable series of short stories that came to define both his name and his literary legacy. Works such as “Torch Song” (1947), “The Enormous Radio” (1947), “Goodbye, My Brother” (1950), “The Five-Forty-Eight” (1954), and “The Country Husband” (1954) trace a finely wrought emotional cartography of the American suburbs, securing Cheever’s place and enduring reputation in the literary canon.

Over time, Cheever infuses the genre with a nuanced aesthetic sensibility, capable of capturing a foundational aspect of American identity itself, what he famously terms “the newness of our ways of life” (2009, 997), a condition inextricably inscribed within the very geography he so meticulously evokes. Reflecting on the profound essence of his literary endeavor, Cheever laments that certain contemporary artistic modalities have neglected “the language of the landscape [and] those rhythms and tonalities that are most deeply ingrained in our memories” (2009, 997). Consequently, his sustained engagement with the short story form may be understood as a conscious effort to recuperate this fundamental dimension, preserving

a shared cultural memory and rendering legible a world undergoing profound transformations while still retaining meaningful traces of its foundational experiences.

It is precisely this capacity to articulate an interior and collective landscape that renders Cheever a paradigmatic figure of *The New Yorker*, an author instrumental in codifying a repertoire of culturally emblematic images characteristic of the postwar decades. His contribution aligns with the magazine's broader editorial mission, whose founding ethos was to "capture the spirit of Manhattan in the 1920s, and to reflect an image of sophistication and urbanity to a largely metropolitan readership" (Price 2019, 256).

Cheever thus emerges as one of the foremost exponents of the *New Yorker* story – a narrative mode that distills a vivid and deeply identifiable portrait of American life within the collective memory. Distinguished by a stylistic identity so recognizable as to function almost as a form of literary branding, this tradition marked, as Ben Yagoda suggests, by its "literary quality," "brevity," and "clarity" (2000, 152), refining an aesthetic gaze that filters and interprets experience with near-crystalline precision, ultimately evolving into a codified genre. As Jonathan Franzen succinctly summarizes:

What made a story *New Yorker* was carefully wrought, many-comma'd prose; its long passages of physical description, the precision and the sobriety of which created a kind of negative emotional space, a suggestion of feeling without the naming of it; its well-educated white characters, who could be found experiencing the melancholies of affluence, the doldrums of suburban marriage, or the thrill or the desolation of adultery; and, above all, its signature style of ending, which was either elegantly oblique or frustratingly coy, depending on your taste. (Franzen 2015)

Within this critical framework, "The Swimmer" emerges as a particularly revealing case. Much of its formal and interpretive force derives from the rigor with which it mobilizes the generic conventions of the short story, particularly those associated with the *New Yorker* tradition. As Joanna Price observes, "Cheever's 'The Swimmer' (1964), with its leitmotif of swimming pools [...] exemplifies the 'well-made' *New Yorker* short story" (2019, 257) precisely insofar as it subjects that tradition's structural coherence to internal strain. In this sense, Cheever's text stands as a paradigmatic instance of an aesthetic of sobriety and implication, reconfiguring its compositional economy so that cadence, segmentation, and temporal dislocation function as primary sites of meaning. The story ultimately takes shape as a calibrated experiment in rhythm, inscribing within its narrative architecture the corporeal and temporal dynamics of swimming. Through processes of rhythmic decentering and differential repetition, Cheever's text translates the theoretical coordinates developed earlier into narrative movement, bodily effort, and temporal disorientation.

Critical accounts have long emphasized the centrality of repetition to this formal design. As Robert Morace observes, “The Swimmer” is written “in a prose equivalent of [...] incremental repetition” (1989, 505), a technique through which recurring scenes acquire meaning via cumulative variation rather than linear progression. Cheever repeatedly revisits similar situations, each iteration marked by subtle yet increasingly consequential differences, so that repetition functions not as the return of the identical, but as a mechanism of narrative displacement. As Blake Bailey likewise notes, the story’s central technical challenge lies in the fact that “Neddy could not possibly repress the truth for some two hundred pages,” and that the “magic involved in making the season change in a single afternoon was better accomplished with a few deft strokes” (2009). What Bailey identifies here is not merely a constraint of length, but a rhythmic problem: the narrative must regulate disclosure, temporal acceleration, and perceptual shift through carefully calibrated intervals rather than extended development. The compression of a seasonal and existential collapse into a single afternoon thus depends on a precise modulation of narrative tempo.

It is against this formal logic that the role of rhythm in the narrative becomes most legible. From its opening pages, the story foregrounds rhythm itself as a corporeal phenomenon. Neddy Merrill’s first immersion is described as a carefully regulated sequence of movements governed by breath, counting, and internalized cadence: “He swam a choppy crawl, breathing either with every stroke or every fourth stroke and counting somewhere well in the back of his mind the one-two one-two of a flutter kick” (Cheever 1978, 777). The alternation of stroke and breath establishes a provisional equilibrium that sustains both physical motion and narrative momentum. At this early stage, repetition operates as a condition of possibility, generating forward movement through the synchronization of gesture and medium.

This initial rhythmic stability finds a direct formal analogue in the story’s episodic structure. Neddy’s itinerary unfolds through a succession of pools whose enumeration follows a paratactic logic: “First there were the Grahams, the Hammers, the Lears, the Howlands, and the Crosscups” (1978, 777). The list itself operates as a rhythmic unit, producing an effect of continuity and forward motion. Each proper name functions as a narrative “stroke,” discrete yet interdependent, contributing to a sequence whose coherence derives less from causal progression than from rhythmic accumulation. At this moment in the narrative, repetition retains a reassuring quality: each pool appears to promise hospitality, refreshment, and the reaffirmation of social belonging.

Yet even within this apparent equilibrium, Cheever subtly introduces the conditions for rhythmic destabilization. The pools are never identical; each encounter introduces subtle tonal shifts, minor affective dissonances, and barely perceptible social tensions. Repetition, accordingly, does not reproduce sameness but generates difference through iteration. What

initially presents itself as a seamless flow gradually reveals internal fissures, and the cumulative effect of these micro-variations begins to alter the narrative's temporal texture, preparing the ground for more explicit forms of resistance and interruption.

The first decisive rupture occurs with the discovery of the drained pool at the Welchers' house: "This breach in his chain of water disappointed him absurdly, and he felt like some explorer who seeks a torrential headwater and finds a dead stream" (1978, 781). The metaphor of the "chain of water" designates both the physical continuity of pools and the narrative chain that has thus far sustained the story's rhythm. The breach interrupts both simultaneously. The swimmer's motion is arrested, and the narrative's cadence is momentarily suspended. This interruption marks a turning point: repetition no longer guarantees continuity, and rhythm begins to encounter resistance. Water, previously experienced as a sustaining medium, now exposes its fragility as a structuring principle.

From this point onward, temporal and cognitive disorientation increasingly permeate the narrative. Neddy's reflections signal a growing incapacity to synchronize memory with experience: "Was his memory failing or had he so disciplined it in the repression of unpleasant facts that he had damaged his sense of the truth?" (1978, 781) Time no longer provides a stable framework for the ordering of events. Seasonal markers intrude unexpectedly, social relations appear distorted, and chronological continuity dissolves into gaps and ellipses. The narrative rhythm mirrors this dislocation, growing uneven and erratic as bodily and temporal coordination begins to falter.

This rhythmic instability is further intensified in the episode of the public swimming pool, where the gesture of swimming is stripped of its fluidity and reduced to endurance: "He had to swim with his head above water to avoid collisions" (1978, 782). Here movement loses its immersive quality and is increasingly shaped by constraint. Rather than yielding to the medium, the swimmer is forced into continuous negotiation, adjusting his body to avoid impact. Rhythm no longer carries motion forward; it begins to register as resistance. The narrative cadence reflects this shift through a denser accumulation of obstacles, confrontations, and humiliations that disrupt the story's earlier flow.

As the journey continues, repetition persists, but its function is fundamentally transformed. Neddy's determination to proceed acquires a compulsive quality, increasingly detached from any clear sense of origin or destination: "He could not go back, he could not even recall with any clearness the green water at the Westerhazys" (1978, 781). The initial point of departure, once sensorially vivid, fades from memory, leaving no stable origin to which the journey might return. Repetition thus ceases to organize experience around a secure point of reference and instead unfolds as a series of reiterations without center or guarantee. Neddy continues not because the rhythm sustains him, but because he is unable to interrupt it. What was once a rhythmic

practice becomes an empty persistence, a motion carried forward by inertia rather than intention.

This transformation culminates in the progressive inscription of exhaustion upon the body itself. As symbolic, social, and temporal frameworks collapse, rhythm is registered at its most elemental level: “His arms were lame. His legs felt rubbery and ached at the joints” (1978, 784). What can no longer be sustained through narrative modulation or symbolic patterning is now borne by the body alone, in pain, fatigue, and physical limitation. It is here that repetition encounters its limit – not through a climactic rupture, but through the gradual erosion of capacity, as the cadence that has carried the story forward quietly dissipates.

The final scene completes this process of decentering. The house, which should function as the narrative’s point of return and symbolic center, is revealed to be empty: “The place was empty” (1978, 788). There is no resolution, no recuperation, no stable endpoint that might retroactively organize the journey into a meaningful arc. Movement has had duration and intensity, but it has produced no synthesis. The narrative closes not with arrival, but with absence and suspension, leaving the trajectory it has traced without center or guarantee. Read against this rhythmic logic, “The Swimmer” reveals a form in which narrative progression is organized by the gradual modulation of movement itself. Swimming operates as formal logic, organizing movement, delay, and exhaustion at the level of the story’s cadence. What persists is not closure, but the trace of a motion carried past its point of coherence.

3. Symbolic strokes: water and the poetics of displacement

This dominant image of flagellation by the flood [...] will be recognized by all swimmers [...] who tell about their swimming experiences, who make poetry out of their swimming.
(Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*)

Gaston Bachelard’s evocative reflection suggests that swimming transcends the mere contingency of physical contact between the body and water, emerging as a liminal experience in which the aquatic element emerges as a primordial force – one that disciplines, interrogates, and ultimately transforms the subject. Within Bachelard’s poetic transformation, water functions as a medium of artistic creation and existential reflection. Swimming – particularly when retrospectively refracted through memory and imagination – becomes a hermeneutic gesture through which raw sensation is elevated into metaphor, and metaphor, in turn, into understanding. It is precisely this saturation of the senses that engenders the impulse to narrate, to sublimate the lived experience of swimming into poetic form. Those who, in Bachelard’s words, “make poetry out of their swimming” effectively reconfigure the physical act

of swimming – the violence of the water – into language, rhythm, and poetic imagery, translating the corporeal into the expressive.

Read in continuity with the preceding sections, Bachelard's poetics therefore functions as a conceptual threshold. If swimming has so far been examined as a rhythmic and structural analogue of short story writing, it now emerges as a symbolic and material practice through which memory, temporality, and identity are mediated within culturally encoded spaces.

In this sense, the poetically charged vision of swimming Bachelard's quotation articulates finds a privileged, though significantly displaced, site of realization in Cheever's "The Swimmer." Cheever's waters are not those of the open sea or the elemental vastness that underwrites Bachelard's imagination of matter. They are swimming pools: bounded, chlorinated, and embedded within the social and ideological architecture of postwar American suburbia. The critical question, therefore, is not whether "The Swimmer" confirms Bachelard's vision, but how it reframes it within a domesticated and socially regulated environment.

As already suggested, Cheever was a perceptive chronicler of mid-twentieth-century suburban life, a social microcosm in which swimming, and more pointedly the ownership of private pools, emerges as a conspicuous marker of privilege, domestic order, and social aspiration.³ In "The Swimmer," this familiar landscape is condensed into a narrative of remarkable symbolic density, where swimming becomes the axis of an inquiry into the complexities of belonging and the construction of identity.

The story's opening, set on a languid midsummer Sunday afternoon, establishes this everyday texture with understated irony, capturing the vacuity of suburban sociability in the refrain of a collective hangover: "everyone sits around saying, 'I drank too much last night'" (Cheever 1978, 776). From this scene of apparent ease emerges Neddy, seated by the edge of a swimming pool with a glass of gin in hand, a figure who initially epitomizes the self-assured poise of the American Dream. His already mentioned decision to "reach his home by water" (1978, 777), by traversing a chain of neighboring pools that he imaginatively names the "Lucinda River," is undertaken in the spirit of adventure by one who conceives himself as "a pilgrim, an explorer, a man with a destiny" (1978, 778).

³ For a critical and historically grounded analysis of the sociocultural significance of swimming pools in the United States, see Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (2007). Wiltse offers a meticulous examination of the swimming pool as a contested social space, deeply entangled with issues of class stratification and racial segregation. From their origins as municipal bathhouses in the nineteenth century to the racially segregated pools of the postwar period, and finally to the polarized landscape of contemporary public versus private aquatic spaces. His study reveals how these sites have functioned as arenas of social conflict and cultural negotiation. Far from being merely sites of leisure, swimming pools emerge in Wiltse's account as microcosms of broader societal fractures, embodying and perpetuating the tensions inherent in American social and racial hierarchies.

Building on the rhythmic dynamics examined in the previous section, Neddy Merrill's journey may now be approached as a process of symbolic conversion rather than as a sequence of narrative events. What is progressively enacted is not merely physical exhaustion or social disenchantment, but the erosion of the symbolic coordinates that have sustained his sense of identity and belonging. The swimming pools, which initially appeared to offer a reassuring circuit of suburban sociability and a reaffirmation of social belonging, come to function as liminal thresholds through which continuity itself is progressively withdrawn. What had once promised orientation and recognition now exposes the fragility of identity, as Neddy persists toward home, though the destination itself no longer secures orientation, recognition, or meaning. The imagined "river" of pools thus emerges as a figure of temporal attrition, a passage through which the social certainties underpinning Neddy's position and self-conception are quietly dissolved. Spaces once invested with emotional and social significance are revealed as desolate, unwelcoming, and estranged – testaments to the disintegration not only of Neddy's dream, but of the very mythos underpinning his world.

The final arrival at the house functions as symbolic disclosure. Awaiting him is not the comforting embrace of domestic familiarity, but a final, devastating revelation. The house stands in darkness – silent, unwelcoming, impenetrable. For an instant, Neddy wonders whether his wife and daughters might simply be asleep or temporarily away, but the oppressive stillness intimates a far more disquieting reality. As he gazes through the window, attempting to glimpse the interior of his own home, the image that unfolds before him seals the journey's end: the house is empty, stripped of life, reduced to a silent shell of a past irretrievably lost. The denouement delivers, with painful clarity, the final collapse of the illusion that has sustained the protagonist. The storm and the abandonment of the home become mirror images of his existential disintegration. Through this parable of decline, Cheever crafts a profound meditation on the fragility of the American Dream, exposing its ephemeral nature when confronted with the inexorable passage of time. Neddy's true tragedy lies not merely in material or emotional loss, but in the insidious process of self-deception through which he has systematically repressed any genuine awareness of his condition. As the summer sun, once imagined as immutable, sets with finality, Neddy finds himself alone beneath a cold rain, unable to trace the precise moment at which his life began to unravel.

It is precisely this powerful and evocative portrayal of existential disintegration – artfully rendered through the surreal symbolism of a suburban swim – that has prompted sustained critical attention to the story's formal complexity. Critics have been particularly attentive to the subtlety of its narrative architecture and to the controlled interplay between mimetic realism and symbolic resonance. Beyond such formal considerations, "The Swimmer" has also been widely regarded as a "generation-defining" (Boddy 2010, 38) text, an incisive meditation on the

anxieties and contradictions of postwar American society. With exceptional lucidity, the story lays bare the gradual disintegration of a seemingly unshakable vision of affluence and domestic stability, revealing its inherent fragility in the face of the inexorable encroachments of reality.

Equally significant is the critical discourse surrounding the story's intertextual and mythopoetic dimensions. William Rodney Allen, for example, underscores the breadth of literary resonance within the text, observing that Cheever offers not merely "a quick tour of literary history by alluding to works by Homer, Shakespeare, and F. Scott Fitzgerald," but rather reimagines the protagonist's suburban swim as a modern-day odyssey, one in which "the protagonist, Neddy Merrill [...] comes to resemble Ulysses wandering the Mediterranean on his return to Ithaca" (1989, 289). This reading is echoed by Cortland Auser, who identifies Neddy as a "modern Ulysses" and views the narrative as a "vital myth of time and modern man" – a genuine "modern myth" (1967, 18) that reconfigures archetypal structures of classical literature within a contemporary existential framework.

Other critical readings situate "The Swimmer" within the broader context of Cheever's ongoing critique of social conformism and the tenuous respectability that underpins American suburban existence. This thematic concern is explicitly affirmed by the author himself, who observes:

Suburbia, which is the setting for many of my stories, reflects the restlessness, the rootlessness of modern lives. It is a way of life that had to be improvised. There were no suburban traditions. People had to learn how to get along with one another and how to establish a new society. (Cheever 1979, 92)

Within this landscape of dislocation and instability, loneliness and alienation insinuate themselves beneath the polished surface of apparent affluence, offering a disenchanting portrait of the American Dream. Joanna Price, in particular, foregrounds the structural dimension of the narrative as inseparable from the spatial aesthetics of suburbia, noting that "[i]n the work of [...] John Cheever, the lyric short story is evolved to accommodate what amounts to an aesthetic of suburbia, in which the spatiality of the short story form becomes embedded in the representation of suburban space and spaces" (2019, 258). Suburban environments – traditionally perceived as domains of outward tranquility, yet also, as critics have noted, spaces marked by alienation and inner conflict – are not merely passive backdrops. Rather, they emerge as active agents within the narrative, shaping and informing both thematic content and structural development. The interplay between form and content thus endows Cheever's work with a distinctive capacity to articulate the ambiguities and contradictions that underlie suburban existence.

In this interpretive framework, Robert Silverstone identifies in the story a “hybridization of space and [...] time” (1997, 8-9), which serves a crucial function in sustaining the identity of the suburban community. The spatial hybridization is expressed through the integration of rural or natural elements within an artificial and urbanized context, reflecting the illusion of a harmonious balance between the natural and the constructed, a foundational tenet of the suburban imaginary centered on ideals of order, stability, and domestic serenity.

Temporal hybridization, by contrast, is enacted through Neddy’s active repression and denial of the past. Through a mechanism of denial, the protagonist represses temporal progression to preserve the illusion of a static, unchanging continuity. This temporal disjunction, intimately tied to the spatial ambiguity of the suburban setting, ultimately underscores the fragility of the narrative’s illusion and the deeper existential tensions it conceals.

Within this conceptual framework, Robert Beuka offers a further elaboration of the mechanisms through which suburban identity is both imagined and sustained, drawing on Benedict Anderson’s influential notion of the “imagined community.” Beuka discerns in “The Swimmer” a literary enactment of Anderson’s idea of “horizontal comradeship,” which designates the sense of solidarity that binds individuals who may never meet but nevertheless perceive themselves as part of a larger collective (2004, 96-97). The story’s opening, with its detailed depiction of Sunday routines – churchgoing, tennis matches, golf games, and visits to the local “wildlife preserve” (Cheever 1978, 776) – situates the reader within a network of ritualized practices that confer structure and coherence upon the suburban milieu. Consequently, these spaces operate not simply as scenic backdrops, but as integral narrative devices, articulating the characters’ belonging to a community forged through the repetitive enactment of shared rituals and conventions. Despite the lack of intimate acquaintance among its members, this suburban microcosm fosters a strong collective identity – an embodiment of “horizontal comradeship” – rooted in the reiteration of shared practices, experiences, and symbols that transcend individual subjectivities.

To the elegance of these “serviceable stroke [...] for long [and refined critical] distances” (1978, 777) one might add a final “domesticated stroke” (Chesnick 1971, 547): a subtle and intentional gesture that further deepens the aesthetic and interpretative complexity developed thus far. This concluding stroke gently returns the reader to the stillness of the private pools – surfaces tinged with “a pale shade of green” (Cheever 1978, 776), “opaque gold” (1978, 783), or darker hues – thereby bringing the critical reflection full circle to the very conceptual locus from which this essay’s inquiry originated.

4. Final drift: making a river of pools

The discussion thus far has revealed how water, swimming, and pools in “The Swimmer” function as generative sites, both symbolically and narratively. It has further shown how the poetically charged vision of swimming traditionally associated with elemental immersion is reframed, in Cheever’s story, within a domesticated and socially regulated environment, where aquatic experience unfolds under conditions of spatial containment and ideological inscription.

A final dimension nonetheless warrants consideration, one that returns to Bachelard’s previously invoked meditation on the ambivalence intrinsic to the human struggle with water. This aspect proves crucial for fully articulating the implications of Cheever’s reframing and for drawing the preceding reflection toward its conclusion.

For Bachelard, the swimming pool constitutes a diminished space. Unlike the sea, “a dynamic environment that responds to the dynamic quality of our assaults” (Bachelard 1983, 167), the swimming pool is divested of metaphysical depth and existential risk. It is, he asserts, a space that “will always lack the fundamental psychological element that makes swimming healthy from a moral point of view” (1983, 168).

Carola Barbero, expanding on this sense of limitation, characterizes the swimming pool as a site of mechanical repetition and psychological stasis, wherein the swimmer is condemned to cyclical motion, perpetually returning to the point of departure and confined within the blue-tiled boundaries of routine. The swimmer’s gaze, fixed on the “T nere”⁴ at the bottom of each lane (Barbero 2024, 27), becomes emblematic of a broader existential impasse: a motion without arrival. Although the swimmer advances toward the future, the completion of each lap inexorably returns them to the point of departure, ensnaring them in a perpetual motion that unrelentingly draws them back into the past.

And yet, “The Swimmer” resists this interpretation of containment. If, as Bachelard and Barbero suggest, the act of swimming in a pool signifies a condition of limitation – be it spatial, psychological, or imaginative – then Neddy Merrill’s journey across the county’s pools emerges as a defiant transgression of such limitations. As previously noted, Neddy’s decision to return home by water does not entail the sterile repetition of laps within a regulated routine but rather initiates a mythic voyage through an unforeseen river of suburban pools transforming a series of chlorinated spaces into a paradoxical topography.

In this regard, Cheever simultaneously invokes and subverts the aesthetic logic articulated by Bachelard, reframing it within the socio-cultural realities of suburban life. Neddy Merrill is alone. Far from the communal leisure typically associated with suburbia, his journey is marked by solitude and escalating alienation. As Price notes, the story’s transformation of suburban

⁴ “Black Ts” (my translation).

pools into a river “paradoxically draws attention to the artificiality of the swimming pools,” and concomitantly, “the precariousness not only of the pools but also of the social bonds articulated through their owners” (2019, 262).

This precariousness becomes particularly evident in Neddy’s encounter with the Hallorans, “an elderly couple of enormous wealth who seemed to bask in the suspicion that they might be Communists.” Their ostensible nonconformity, signaled by their preference for naked swimming, proves hollow: their courteous indifference and their being “not surprised or displeased” (Cheever 1978, 783) by Neddy’s visible distress reveal a latent complicity with the very social order they appear to contest.

Yet the Hallorans episode also introduces the motif of naked swimming as a symbolic gesture of return to nature. From the outset, Neddy himself has entertained the desire to shed his bathing suit – “he would have liked to swim without trunks” – as if nudity might effect a “resumption of a natural condition [...] but this was not possible” (1978, 777). Upon reaching the Hallorans’ property, however, he “stepped politely out of his trunks before he went through the opening in the hedge” (1978, 783), a gesture that, while outwardly conforming to his hosts’ habits, simultaneously prefigures a deeper symbolic shift. Indeed, several details in this episode suggest that the motif of respectful conformity is intertwined with, and ultimately overshadowed by, the theme of returning to nature, which emerges here with particular force. The Hallorans pool itself, described as “perhaps the oldest in the country,” “seems to be more natural than others” (1978, 783). It appears to merge seamlessly with the surrounding environment. Devoid of technological “garments,” it is simply “a fieldstone rectangle, fed by a brook. It had no filter or pump and its waters were the opaque gold of the stream” (1978, 783).

This shedding of cultural layers finds a striking resonance beyond the fictional world. The act of undressing – and, more radically, of being naked – as a return to nature acquires a further dimension when viewed through an autobiographical lens. Cheever himself confessed that, before writing, he would remove his clothes and work in his “underwear” (Cheever 2009, 996), as though this physical exposure enacted a ritual of symbolic divestment before entering his fictional world: a deliberate return to a more originary state through writing, stripping away the cultural “garments” that mediate experience.

In this sense, writing itself becomes an analogue of Neddy’s naked swim: both are enacted as movements of descent toward a foundational condition in which the boundaries between self, world, and language are momentarily dissolved. Just as Neddy’s passage through water suspends the social coordinates of suburban life, the act of writing temporarily loosens the conventional strictures of language, opening a fluid space from which meaning can later emerge. This symbolic regression is not an end in itself but a generative interval, a momentary dissolution of boundaries that allows the world to be returned in altered form, whether as lived

experience for the swimmer or as narrative for the writer. Thus, one might say that what flows through “The Swimmer” is not merely water but also ink: the fluid medium of composition that binds together the protagonist’s physical trajectory and the writer’s creative process.

As the story unfolds, its structure, like its protagonist, begins to fracture. What begins as a seemingly whimsical expedition through a sun-dappled suburb gradually descends into temporal dislocation and narrative instability. The pools are no longer mere settings but textual devices: each one a narrative unit, a syntactic pause, a reflective surface that refracts memory and emotion. Neddy’s swim thus generates a visible “upper current” of action, but beneath it moves an “under current” of “layers of meaning that are not directly articulated, but nevertheless present in the lyrical self’s discourse: memories, sentiments and associations” (Buescu 2008, 32-33).

In this way Cheever crafts a story that is as much a meditation on suburban disillusionment as it is an exploration of the act of writing itself, its fragmentations, its recursive rhythms, and its capacity to reflect the instability of identity. As Neddy approaches his home, he confronts not only personal loss but the gradual unraveling of the narrative’s own internal logic and temporal structure. In this moment, Cheever transcends the mere depiction of an individual’s collapse, staging instead the quiet implosion of the American Dream alongside the literary forms once deemed adequate to represent it.

In Cheever’s hands, water becomes language: fluid, unstable, and reflective. His pools are neither Bachelard’s sterile enclosures, nor Barbero’s claustrophobic loops. They are sites of mythic resonance, poetic dislocation, and narrative experimentation. Cheever neither denies nor escapes the artificiality of this world; rather, he writes through its seams, allowing meaning to seep and leak in evocative, often unsettling ways.

John Chesnik’s insight on Cheever’s literary position poignantly underscores this dynamic. He argues that “The Swimmer” stands as “the best possible parable of Cheever’s predicaments as a writer”: American life, he suggests, “has moved from ocean-side to pond-side to pool-side and Cheever must write of it in short stories [...] with his own domesticated stroke, perhaps good for short distances but not for long journeys of the imagination” (Chesnik 1971, 547).

And yet, “The Swimmer” ultimately defies this apparent limitation. Even within the bounded form of the short story, Cheever manages to dive deep – articulating, with remarkable concision and lyricism, the disjunction of existence, the fluidity of memory, the instability of identity, and the recursive, unending labor of artistic creation.

Bionote

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