

THE SILVER LINING: UNCOVERING GREYNESS FROM JOHN CHEEVER'S STORIES.

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ABSTRACT: John Cheever (1912-1982), the chronicler of the suburbia—Shady Hill—is known to present microcosmic snapshots of the maladies that beset modern society. His stories seem to capture the guilts, the frustrations, the disillusionments that infect contemporary life with all their attendant conflicts, disappointments and discontents without evasion. His avowed purpose seems to be to expose the depravity that underlies the polished exterior of society and he finds the New York suburb a rich ground for his frays into the dark corner of the human heart. Yet, despite the fact that he is a compulsive 'worm-seeker', he is akin to a good doctor who announces the disease very timely in an effort to make people realize and take precautions while there is still time. The present paper analyses the dark clouds to uncover the silver lining beneath them.

Keywords: modern society, chronicles, Shady Hill, silver lining

2

Better known for his novels the *Falconer* (1977), *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957), *The Way Some People Live* (1943), John Cheever has now come to hold an important place in the realm of short story writing. Bracketed earlier with the story, then with the fabulists, today he is truly in the company of the (post?) modernists a space which he merits to occupy. His short narratives are collages of techniques, integrating bits and pieces of the realistic and the fabulous with the mythical, the mystical and the allegorical into a seemingly cohesive whole which, although it runs coherently, defies and debunks natural rhythms.

Cheever's stories dwell largely on the suburban middleclass—the zoning laws, the apartment houses, elevator men, weekend parties, air planes and commuter trains and their commitment evils. However, the protagonist who is enmeshed in this web of the net workings and is temporarily weakened by their overwhelming grips, who stumbles into their traps, is seen to quickly regain his balance as Kazim (1971) insightfully says "the crisis is the trying-out of sin, escape, the abyss" (111). Cheever

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maintains that the common man is basically good but a prey to circumstances that deter him from the right path: the "Housebreaker of Shady Hill" steals when he is out of job, or "The country Husband" falls in love with a baby sitter when he has no one else to communicate his thoughts to. It is not the act, not the 'what' but the 'why' that is important for Cheevers.

Joshua Gilder (1982) speaking about "John Cheever's Affirmation of Faith" quotes Cheever as asserting that he has always associated "evil with darkness" and "goodness quite openly with light"(19) and that darkness is that "every cloud" that has a 'silver lining'. It is his faith that lights up the darker areas of his fiction:

Throughout his life, Cheever has tried in his fiction to bring order to chaos and to exalt the decent and the beautiful, through he often doubted that good would prevail over evil. The despair in his fiction is palpable. But so too is the abiding faith that answers it. (19)

Cheever's moments of doubt, his awareness of evil and his fear of darkness indeed permeate his fiction giving it a thematic coherence but the design, the larger motif that runs as a subtext is the hope that fear and evil are surface cracks that have not eroded the foundational pillars of human faith.

It can be very well inferred that Cheever's stories deal with what appears through these cracks, what lies beneath the veneer, what turbulent reality lies behind the polished and the barely maintained equilibrium:

It is true of even the best of us that if an observer can catch us boarding a train at a way station; if he will mark our faces, stripped by anxiety of their self-possession; if he will appraise our luggage, our clothing, and look out of the window to see who has driven us to the station; if he will listen to the harsh or tender things we say if we are

with our families, or notice the way we put our suitcases on the rack, check the position of our wallet, our keyring, and wipe the sweat off the back of our necks. If he can judge sensibly the self-importance, diffidence, or sadness with which we settle ourselves, he will be given a broader view of our lives than most of us would intend.

(Stories 88)

And although Cheever wants to find the broader view he is not in favour of lifting the carpet corner to discover the dirt under it. In "The Worm in the Apple" he says:

The Crutchmans were so happy and so temperate in all their habits and so pleased with everything that came their way that one was bound to suspect a worm in their rosy apple and that the extraordinary apple and rosiness of the fruit was only meant to conceal the gravity and the depth of the infection. (Stories, 285)

Cheever goes on to describe the ideal state of happiness of the couple that foils all at finding the chink in their armour. The story ends with " . . .one might wonder if the worm was not in the eye of the observer who, through timidity or moral cowardice, could not embrace the broad range of their natural enthusiasms".(288). And although happiness is the favoured goal of life, man is suspicious of its presence and doubts all manifestations of it trying to probe for unhappiness under its cover. The moralist in Cheever seems to assert that one has become so used to disappointments and frustrations that any life without these looks a put on act.

In the "Enormous Radio" Cheever uses the radio as a view-on the lives of those who inhabit an apartment building just to see how unhappiness is the way of their being. Jim and Irene Westcott are an ordinary middle class couple who live on the twelfth floor of an apartment houses near Stutton Place. Their interest in music makes them buy a new radio when their old one suddenly breaks down. Through a freak

accident the radio tunes in onto not different stations but to the different apartments of the apartment the Westcotts live in. Thus they acquire a peephole through which they can look into the privacy of the families occupying the building. Irene becomes a compulsive peeper—she hears a middle-aged couple complaining of poor health, a mother scolding her child; "She over-heard demonstrations of indigestions, carnal love abysmal vanity, faith and despair"(37). The effect is disastrous: the peaceful and content life of the Westcotts is overcast by the pain, melancholy and despair of other people. Irene wails out terrified; "Life is too terrible, too sordid and awful" (40). According to Burton Kendle (1967) this is the ironic reinterpretation of the Eden story" the fall from assumed innocence to awareness, specifically self awareness and its attendant anguish" (264); and the 'fall' is crack which shows on the surface and its knowledge is what makes life more bearable, the pain more understandable. And although their innocent faith in human goodness is destroyed they have yet arrived at what life really is and how one has to learn how to face it.

Face it, man has to and he has to learn to love life and not be obsessed with the fact "it is rotten to the core". In "Goodbye, My Brother" Cheever very interestingly puts this fact across. Lawrence, the youngest son of the Pommeroy family, is a classic example of a man who is forever finding fault. When Lawrence arrives at a family gathering for summer vacation, he has them all wriggling with discomfort under the eagle-eyed stare of his: he disapproves of his sister's affairs; he finds fault with the house, its doors, its windows and even its floor-boards; he notices his mother's drunkenness; he refuses to participate in the family game at the country-club ball. In the course of the story, the narrator gets so exasperated that he remarks:

Oh, whatever you do with a man like that? What can you do? How can you dissuade his eye in a crowd for seeking out the cheek with acne, the infirm hand; how can you teach him to respond to the inestimable greatness of the race, the harsh surface beauty of life; how can you put his finger for him on the obdurate truths before which fear and horror are powerless? (21)

Lawrence has an equal in Joan Harris of the “Torch Song” who also seeks the darkest side of things, who swells out the signs of decay like an Angel of Death. Jack Lorey, a prey to her probing cries out: “Does it make you feel young to watch the dying?” But the subtlety of Cheever does not lie in the portrayal of the bad and evil, rather it is in the perpetuation of the goodness of life. Jack goes on to say:

My life isn't ending. My life's beginning. There are wonderful years ahead of me. There are, there are wonderful, wonderful, wonderful years ahead of me,” (102)

These are examples of the other side of life that are necessary to throw up in relief as a contrast, the goodness of life. Had all been silver one would not have known what silver—the dark cloud is essential for the discovery of the true tones of silver. Such unapplaudable distortions and perversions are but whims and eccentricities, the errant notes that juxtapose the goodness by drawing contrastive parallels.

Cheever makes it a point to project the unstated truth that such darkness of temperament taints even the one who is obsessed with fault-discovering. The very fact that it disconcerts the very person who wants to use it as a weapon upon others helps Cheever stress his purpose. Amy Lawton in “The Sorrows of Gin” is one such ‘decorous’ being who probes for the shortcomings of others, and provoked by these she herself play acts them out—like indulging in drinking as her father is apt to. When the alcohol theft is discovered the sophisticated façade of her father is rent asunder and Amy is conscience stricken. Mr. Lawton repents but Amy is distorted for life and cannot reclaim her goodness of spirit. The same is the case with Cash Bentley in “O Youth and Beauty”. Cash had prided himself on his youth and agility. A track runner, he was proud of outdoing every other runner. A fall one day breaks his leg and now he becomes aware of the decay all around him: the rank smell of meat; the reeking earth round roses; the broken spider web; the old whore looking like death. The man who had gloated at his youth is now surrounded with fantasies of death, and one who was disdainful of accidents falls a prey to them twice—once breaking his leg, second an accidental short taking his life. Youth and beauty are but external manifestations, as

sophistications and decorousness are, the slightest push can wipe them away or tear them apart to show more stable insides of human life.

For Cheever outward charm can also conceal serious problems. Thus it is not only dark clouds that can throw the silver lining into prominence but even silver lining that can frame the dark clouds. This Cheever makes happen in “The Scarlet Moving Van” where a couple Gee-Gee and Peaches with their children one day arrive in the “unincorporated township of B—”. It was a place “where the ailing the disheartened and the poor could not ascend the steep moral path that formed its natural defense, and the moment any of the inhabitants became infected with unhappiness or discontent, they sensed the hopelessness of existing on such a high spiritual attitude” (359). So Gee-Gee and the Peaches are cordially invited by the neighbours for drinks and Gee-Gee gets high and starts undressing and being nasty. Peaches says that it is his usual behaviours which has caused them to be constantly on the move. Come morning Gee-Gee becomes his personable self again and more neighbours are taken in. But the debunking of the ending is very meaningful. One neighbour Charlie cannot come to the assistance of Gee-Gee now in need of help because of a broken hip, and he has to pay by losing his job and being on the move, Cheever seems to play on the theme of human responsibility in the story. Getting drunk and nasty may be temporary abrasions but not to respond to someone in need is the shirking of human responsibility and a breach of human values. So, what Gee-Gee does is merely an external crack, but Charlie comments something that darkens his cloud of life and wipes out all expectations of the silver.

It can be seen that Cheever, for all his cynicism, affirms moral values and a Christianity of spirit, he celebrates tradition, and believes in heavenly grace. It is rain that cleanses the housebreaker in “The Housebreaker of Shady Hill” and the angel who helps the protagonist in “The Angel of the Bridge”. But always before these virtues can be asserted, there is the weakening of the flesh and vulnerable moments of breaking up. It is these moments, these dark moments of guilt or jealousy, pretence or deceit, that Cheever swoops upon and picks up for the world to see. Because of his interest in the cracks and aberrations, Cheever’s characters are not fully-developed ones, we see them

only acting out a part of their lives which is crucial for the author to project the spoilt veneer. It is not the totality of one individual life, but the totality of human existence that Cheever is interested in.

For example, Cheever quite often picks up instances of matrimonial infidelity, so subtle are these chinks that they could very well have gone unnoticed had Cheever not brought out his magnifying glass. But these are important to understand and recognize lest one may step into them unawares. In a story, "The Season of Divorce" Cheever very skillfully introduces a chink in the character of the wife, Ethel, whom he portrays as pleasant and gentle—she cannot say 'no' to any body. So when Dr. Frencher, a newcomer to the neighbourhood, starts becoming a regular visitor to the playground where she takes her children, she cannot but go along being courteous. Things worsen, Dr Frencher leechlike clings to her and gains her sympathy, Ethel's husband knows of Ethel's helplessness, of how she cannot "refuse any voice that sounds pitiable" (141). Not only does Frencher succeed in making her pity him, he also makes her aware of all that she is missing in life—she starts resenting that she has forgotten her French, how she looks. Her marriage is on the rocks but precisely at this moment Frencher makes an unusual proposal—that he will give Ethel money to live alone till the divorce comes through. This is appalling and the darkness of intentions comes through loudly. Ethel is not only better understood but she understands her own problem better by the end of the day.

In "The Cure" we see Rachel already separated from her husband. Twice before they had separated and the second time they had divorced and remarried. Her husband, though agreeing that it was a "carnal and disastrous marriage"(156) is unable to bear loneliness. It starts pulling on him, giving him hallucinations, he even imagines a peeping Tom at nights whom he cannot shoo away. The only cure seems to be to get Rachel back—the errant on the right track. But in "The Country Husband" the protagonist goes off at a tangent since he is unable to communicate properly. He meets death very closely as his plane crashes. He wants to narrate this first to his neighbours then to his wife and children who are all unable to register his extraordinary experience. So he, in his very vulnerable situation, falls in love with a babysitter, Anne. He is found out in a very compromising situation by a 'stray' in the area and then by his wife, who

seeing his helplessness, decides not to divorce him. In "The Chimera" the protagonist falls in love with an imaginary woman to escape his shrewish wife. When his wife reprimands him for talking to himself, he lands with a thud down to earth.

In all these stories we see Cheever taking up very common ailments that can infect a peaceful married life. He admonishes those who err unthinkingly, or those who invent problems for themselves. His criticism of modern-day sexual mores is obvious though not blatantly put. He never pushes a point so that it hurts but does expose the dirt under the carpet before brushing it in so far that it does not show. However, he does so so obviously that one is aware of its presence so that others do not get stifled with it. While the whole exercise is being undertaken, Cheever makes sure that the aberrations and distortions bring pain and alienation though he brings him back to conventionality—the silver linings.

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Biography

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