



On the Image of Alcohol in John Cheever's *The Swimmer*

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Abstract

The image of alcohol prevails in John Cheever's short story *The Swimmer*. It emerges as different kinds of drinking, and promotes the plot development. This paper intends to examine how Cheever represents alcohol in *The Swimmer* and how he depicts alcoholic characters, to probe into the significance of the inextricable bond between alcohol and class affiliation, family disintegration and spiritual crisis, and further, to clarify the social and cultural imperatives of alcohol in the context of middle 20th century America, so as to help us learn the power of alcohol, discover why it struggles so much with alcoholic beverages, and shed light on dealing with troubles with alcohol.

Key words: John Cheever; Alcohol; Class affiliation; Family disintegration; Spiritual crisis

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Swimmer (1964) is one of the best known short stories of John Cheever (1912 – 1982). It narrates Neddy Merrill's eventful eight-mile homeward swimming journey. Critics have paid full attention to it from different perspectives, such as its relation with the monomyth pattern of Joseph Campbell (Thakur, 2015), the negative capability (Kennedy, 2015), the suburban psychology (Wilhite, 2006), the Suburban Landscape (Meanor,

2006), the feminist force (Kane, 2004), and so on. In these studies, the special characteristic of suburban is fully explained, and the myth pattern or allusions are explicitly expounded, even the feminist force gradually gets readers' attention. As for the suburban lifestyle and the myth pattern of this story, the image of alcohol and its cultural connotations can be fully explored. Alcohol echoes the swimming water. It also intermingles with water just like the blending of body and soul, flesh and spirit. Therefore, it is the symbol of suburban life and key element for the Neddy's mythic quest. Actually, this highly symbolic story reveals profound details revolve around alcohol. There emerge different kinds of alcoholic beverages, such as wine, claret, whisky, brandy, beer, gin, and so on. Moreover, alcohol drinking promotes the plot development. In a midsummer Sunday party, suburbanites sit around, shaking off the effects of the previous night's excessive drinking. Neddy decides to go back home by crossing the swimming pools of his neighbors or acquaintances. Over the course of the swimming journey, he is entertained with drinks by some friendly neighbors, he also helps himself to a poolside cocktail whose owners are not home, and he even begs for drinks from Mrs. Biswanger and Shirley Adams when he feels tired and weak, being greeted with humiliation. Drunk and chilled from the swimming adventure, Neddy gets spiritual corruption at the end of his journey. The theme of drinking is weaved subtly into the narrative without certain terms of alcoholism. And it relies on characterization and plot development to suggest the potential of alcohol to deceive and even destroy the protagonist as he coped with the pressures of daily life. Obviously, Cheever's primary interest in drinking is societal. He explores the manifold effects of alcohol, potential or actual, in marriage, family, and society. (Gilmore, 1987)

Alcohol has played important role in the sociocultural history of America. Even in the era of Prohibition, alcohol continued to establish sociability in new ways. Prohibition

facilitated social drinking since it did not forbid drinking at home. (Aaron & Musto, 1981) The home, then, provided a new chance for alcohol: the cocktail party. After repeal, alcoholic beverages were considered to be creditable; women as well as men were persuaded into drinking with no risk to their health or reputation. Alcohol consumption became acceptable in mainstream society, melded into the dominant culture's recreational life and signified social prestige. Accordingly, there came the glamorization of alcohol drinking among middle-class folk who considered themselves respectable.

John Cheever focuses on that affluent middle-class blessed with ample leisure time and material comforts, setting his stories in the prosperous suburbs. He interprets the problem of alcohol in certain ways that accounts for broader aspects as class identity, marital expectation and family role, clarifies the connections between alcohol consumption and class affiliation, family disintegration and individual spiritual crisis, and reveals how alcohol came to signify darker, potentially damaging effects of postwar American society.

Therefore, this paper intends to examine how Cheever represents alcohol in *The Swimmer* and how he depicts alcoholic characters, to probe into the significance of the inextricable bond between alcohol and class affiliation, family disintegration and spiritual crisis, and further, to clarify the social and cultural imperatives of alcohol in the context of middle 20th century America, so as to help us learn the power of alcohol, discover why it struggles so much with alcoholic beverages, and shed light on dealing with troubles with alcohol.

1. ALCOHOL AND CLASS AFFILIATION

Cheever presents endless cocktail parties along the Lucinda River which is named by Neddy after his wife in *The Swimmer*. Men and women indulge in drinking; husbands and wives, neighbors and friends, all engage in cocktail parties. They are busy with shaking off the effects of the previous nights' excessive drinking when the story begins. Neddy, with drinking at house after house, continues to fuel his illusion of belonging to this social circle of middle class.

After repeal, the at-home cocktail party was prevalent for suburbanites. The famous martini rituals of President Roosevelt made the cocktail hour well accepted. One authority on U.S. drinking customs Georgio Lolli interpreted the "cocktail hour" as gatherings in homes, bars, or hotel lobbies, and it was "prompted by the need for companionship or by social, business, or professional duties." (Lolli, 1960, pp.88-89) He even explicitly pointed out that the standard time for the cocktail hour was around 5:30 or 6:00 p.m., when the daily activities have ended and the supper has not yet begun. In addition, most early evening drinking occurred in groups. (Lolli, 1960)

Except for the timing, some other aspects of drinking became standardized. William Grimes, an observer of drinking customs, noticed that mixed drinks were gaining popularity, especially, streamlined, straightforward drinks such as martinis, Manhattans, and old-fashioned became the order of the day. By 1960, they dominated the U.S. drinking scene. Grimes further suggest that "The sanitized, commercialized version of middle-class life that defined the 1950s can be seen in the nation's drinking habits as well. ... The man in the gray flannel suit drank a dry martini, a gin and tonic, a Scotch and soda—safe choices that put you in solidly with the right people." (Grimes, 1993, p.112) That signified the effects of alcohol as the medium of social bonds among men. It lubricated social interaction to a great extent. Men of the professional-managerial classes gave and received gifts to cement social and business relationships. Indeed, the alcohol consumption is good for business because professionals and businessmen attempted to make valuable career contacts via fraternizing and drinking in business lunches and dinners and cocktail gatherings. Drinking had become an inextricable component of career climbing. To be successful breadwinners, men needed to integrate into the competitive corporate world, even masking any feelings of disillusionment.

Moreover, alcohol became a badge of social status and affluence. The 1950s advertisements continued to define it as the sign of social distinction. One advertisement for Harwood's whiskey nudged the reader towards gift exchange of whiskey. Another ad for Martin's whiskey depicted a businessman sitting in his office behind a desk strewn with liquor bottles, wrapped presents, and holiday gift tags. The manicured fingernails of his secretary can be seen in the bottom corner, crossing off names on a Christmas gift list with a fine quill pen. And it suggested Martin's would be the perfect choice when the grand gesture is expected. (Rotskoff, 2002) From the ads, the prestigious labels of whiskey could establish one's social status. Therefore, it brought about the domestic consumer competition which is also known as "keeping up with the Joneses." Serving the right brand of whiskey or champagne would develop into the similar effects of a prestigious automobile or stylish home furnishings. Till then, the alcohol was more than a commodity; it promised to facilitate status seeking and career climbing.

Adhering to the cocktail rituals, the middle class individuals like Neddy aimed to get accepted by others. According to William Whyte's (1956) now-classic studies of white, middle class communities, the dominant members of U.S. society valued belongingness as the ultimate need of the individual. They even sought group identification at the expense of individuality. For which, American society became a "lonely crowd" of like-minded, "other-directed" conformists. (Breines, 1992, p.25) The conformists' suburbia was criticized as

somewhere everyone “buys the right car, keeps his lawn like his neighbor, eats crunchy breakfast cereal, and votes Republican” (Patterson, 1996, p.338). John Seeley shed light on the suburban clubs, revealing their functions in social interaction and class division. According to him, membership in social clubs enabled the middle class individuals to proclaim their belongingness to prestigious cliques and achieve the sense of psychological shelter, almost equivalent to the protection from the office or the home. But mere membership was not adequate to achieve status within a club community; adherence to the “pattern of activities” was also required therein. And drinking figured significantly in that pattern of activities. Supplying and drinking some certain quantities of straight whiskey was necessary for men who sought status in this clique of “neighborly good fellows.” (Seeley, Sim, and Loosley, 1956, p.300) Despite their similar class status or cultural background, men who did not drink the required amount would be demoted to the margins of club. If a newcomer was considered objectionable, he would be gradually frozen out. (Seeley, Sim, and Loosley, 1956) Apparently, alcohol plays essential role in intimacy creating and status seeking.

The Swimmer shows how hard Neddy tries to keep in conformity with his neighbors. During his temporary stops at the Grahams and the Bunkers, Neddy tries to cater for them, handles their hospitality with diplomacy. He accepts it and even feels “a passing affection ... a tenderness” for the parties, kisses eight or ten women, and shakes hands of as many men (Cheever, 1978, p.728). In order not to be considered objectionable, Neddy sneaks off from the gatherings and goes on with his journey. Obviously, he doesn't want to be considered different or objectionable by his neighbors, even though he seems to reject the assimilation of his drinking friends by making a seemingly outstanding quest— to go home by water. Meanwhile, the future development of the story expounds that drinking is no less important to him than to his friends. First, he holds a glass of gin beside the Westerhazys' pool before the homeward journey; then, he deliberately refrains from drinking at the Grahams' and the Bunkers'; and he helps himself to a drink when he reaches the Levys', by which, he has had already consumed four or five drinks. (Cheever, 1978, p.729) However, that is merely the midpoint in his journey. On the second half of his journey, his desire or need for a drink increases. He has one more at the Biswangers, and he tries to get at least another three before his journey is finished. From the above, Neddy's drinking is probably no more moderate than that of his neighbors. (Graves, 1974) In addition, Neddy gradually comes to regret having left the company of his friends due to this journey. He is upset over the sense of social insecurity, and he is afraid of being expelled from his milieu. Unfortunately, that uneasy worry comes true as he reaches his empty house, a reminder and testimony of his past turpitude and failure.

Represented by Neddy, the vast newly middle class emerged in the middle 20th century America due to the rapid progress of post war economy. They worked for big capitalists and earned their livings by providing service of professional knowledge and technology. They relied solely on salaries. Even though they tried their best to cling to the social circle by gathering in suburbs, consuming symbol commodities, keeping social bonds with others, their status was fragile. As the tiny components of the big machine of American economy, they were deprived of not only independence in work, but also ration in mind. The illusion of affluent middle class lifestyle made them broken into pieces.

2. ALCOHOL AND FAMILY DISINTEGRATION

Cheever's short stories not only meditate on the class conformity, but also dramatize the damaging effects of alcohol on family life, and even envision alcoholism as a family disease. Infidelity, adultery, seduction, or promiscuity is often abetted by or associated with drinking in Cheever's works. (Gilmore, 1987) In *The Swimmer*, Neddy commits adultery with Shirley Adams, from whom he looks forward to comfort after being snubbed at the previous house on his homeward swimming journey. He recalls their joy and supreme elixir together, and hopes to rekindle this extramarital affair. But this wish proves to be a wishful fantasy. Shirley gets hurt after Neddy broke off their relationship, and she is irritated to be asked to lend Neddy money. She even refuses to offer Neddy a drink because she has already replaced him with a new lover. After knowing that, Neddy gets devastated and bursts into tears. He has been trapped in the game of exploitation and deception, trying to cure himself with the twin elixirs of sex and alcohol. Excessive drinking may function as the ultimate price for his extramarital sex. In keeping with the alcoholic manhood and being clinging to the middle class suburbanite's lifestyle, Neddy pins his hope on social drinking. But his excessive drinking envisions his failure in bread-winning and develops into the manifestation of failed gender-role performance and rejection of familial imperatives.

The family disease of alcohol affects spousal relationship directly. Neddy and Lucinda once enjoyed the typical middle class life. They settle down in a house with modern furniture and a swimming pool in the suburb. They have four daughters. The wife is more likely to spend her time entertaining, playing tennis, looking after the children, and lugging things home. From some neighbors' warm reaction to Neddy's appearance, it is presumably that Lucinda is quite a socially prominent wife. However, the fact that Lucinda pays no attention to her husbands' unusual plan of going home by water, staying at the Westerhazys drinking and chatting, makes

it clear that their harmonious relationship has been ruined. Over the course of his journey, Neddy continues to wonder where his wife would be, and further, he gets eager for his family when he reaches his own house. That indicates the the hopelessness of their reunion. Being vacillating between his socially prominent wife and his lusty mistress, Neddy turns to alcohol to blot out the guilt that ensued.

This predicament was echoed by Cheever's own experience. Cheever also experienced family crisis due to his engagement in bisexuality. He was never comfortable with his gay side, resulting in periods of self-laceration. Being raised but unloved by his feuding parents, Cheever was mainly supported by his elder brother Frederick, a former hockey star at Dartmouth. It was Frederick that enabled him to begin the career of writing. They travelled and lived together after leaving home. Bailey (2009) pointed out the possibility of abnormal intimacy between them during Cheever's young manhood. After that, Cheever developed a casual fling or two with other boys. Nevertheless, Cheever felt guilty and ashamed of himself. In the post-war era, homosexual was rejected and treated as threat to national security in the anticommunist and Cold War context. Fear of the sordid life and violent ending, such as the iconic tragic homosexual fate of the poet Hart Crane, Cheever really needed a wife, needed the normal family life. He got married with Mary Winternitz in 1941. They had three children and enjoyed the nearly perfect suburban life. But their marriage turned toxic inevitably. Cheever was repressed psychologically by the normal family life, and he turned to seek solace in alcohol increasingly. Drinking became his best way of assuaging frustration and anxiety. Homoerotic release would make his life fulfilling, but Cheever was circumscribed by the strict suburban code of conduct, and he thirsted for respectability from his milieu as well as his readers. So he chose to repress his impulses, putting up a desperate fight to appear normal.

Cheever's frustration must be considered in a broader social context. In the first two decades following World War II, the progress of Cold War, the competition of economy and military, especially the successful launch of Soviet satellite had brought Americans great panic. The uncertainty of the future had driven Americans back home, which were supposed to provide shelter for them, keeping apart from the outside world dangers. Young people married in greater numbers at younger ages, bore more children, with fewer separations than their predecessors. Moreover, the traditional idea of men managing external affairs women internal was accepted unexpectedly. Accordingly, masculine domesticity emerged and soon reshaped male gender identity of middle-class men. It encouraged them to seek meaning and happiness within family as well as the workplace, exhorted them to balance virility and aggressiveness with a heightened interest in

domestic matters. This new mode of male gender identity stressed men's roles as fathers and husbands, entailed the companionate marriage, improved the husband and wife relationship. (Griswold, 1993) Therefore, middle-class breadwinner not only needed to succeed in the workplace, but also limited the fruits sharing of his labor to his family. Home-loving men were more popular. Masculine domesticity and bread-winning were two sides of the same coin.

Even though there were some exceptions of rebel, considering the harsh attitudes towards divorce at that time, few of them would risk renouncing the reward of social economic development as a result of betraying their families. (Breines, 1992) Neddy doesn't intend to renounce the reward from society, but he really betrays his family. So he feels guilty just like Cheever. His repentance can be signified by his immersion in the water. According to Blythe and Sweet (1984), Neddy's repeated immersions in the swimming pools resemble baptisms. Baptism demonstrates an inner spiritual commitment and constitutes a sign of confessing and repentance. "To be embraced and sustained by the light green water was less a pleasure, it seemed, than the resumption of a natural condition." (Cheever, 1978, p.727) There's an explicit link between the desire for buoyancy and the need to drive away his sin resulted from his betraying and drinking. Even the phrase "resumption of a natural condition" recalls the naked swimmer of the womb, irresponsible and free-floating in his purely alcohol realm, and bears desires to be forgiven or accepted again. In Gospels, John's baptism functions as a testimony for repentance. John can call people to repentance, but he cannot forgive the repentant in his own name, for his baptism cannot bestow the Holy Spirit. The water in the pools became dirtier and dirtier, the day got dimmer and dimmer, and Neddy's physical strength wanes progressively. This external weakness indicates his inner degeneration, and envisions the futility of his baptism.

Except for using alcohol as a means to dull psychic pain, Cheever abandoned the repressing of sexual impulses literally by making Neddy indulge in the extramarital affair. He also presents its damaging effect and the guilt it ensued. Man needs a third party to balance his lost in the ungratified spousal relationship. The controlling of the third party and the affection from the third party bring him self-realization and enrichment. Through which, his self-value is reconfirmed. But that emotional pattern would not afford him with ever-last or genuine happiness. On the contrary, it would intensify his loneliness and panic, for the men in adultery cannot dominate his own life, and has to face not only the conflict between his inner lust and social system of marriage and family, but also the contradiction of his false self and true self, falling into spiritual crisis inevitably.

3. ALCOHOL AND SPIRITUAL CRISIS

Spirit refers to a person's mind or feelings as distinct from his body, and spirits also indicates strong distilled alcoholic drinks, such as whisky, brandy, gin and rum. The wording of spirit intermingles the soul and body, the mood and substance, causing the narrative to be salted with wit. The story is remarked by its abundant evidence of images of alcohol or drinking, such as polite offers of drink, asking for a drink, refusal of drink, longing for drinks, and so on. Moreover, Neddy's exhausted physical condition after swimming represents his disintegrating spiritual state. It hints that the fact is probably not as he tells. Not until the end of the story does it make clear that Neddy suffers from serious delusions about his life. He has maximized his gift for concealing painful facts. He intends to forget that he had got bankruptcy, his wife had left him, his children were in trouble, his neighbors got ill or left. Then, the affluent middle class life along the Lucinda River turns to be a complete illusion or dream. The alcohol never allowed Neddy to escape his past. Rather, it intensified his misery.

People may use alcohol to escape the miserable state and to release psychological and emotional discomfort of reality. (Kieffer, Cronin & Gawer, 2006) Daily tasks bring adults great amount of strain. Sexually mature men need to cope with the roles of dutiful husband, father, and family breadwinner. Their only normal lifestyle has been assumed to be marriage and parenthood. Many of them turn to alcohol as a means of releasing stress, as a method to erase bad memories, and as a way to flee from responsibilities or undesirable life circumstances. In the realm of alcohol, there is little space for the home-building affection. Actually, alcohol commits potentially devastating effect on marital intimacy. The alcoholic men were not fit for the intimate married life, and they were afraid of the close association of marriage. Even those who had got married were doomed to failure since alcohol intensified their immaturity, egoism, and self-pity. (Bacon, 1945) Cheever himself struggled "to escape the trappings and traps he had so carefully constructed for himself, to free himself from marriage and the legal and emotional constraints of the conventional upper-middle-class life, to leave behind the torpid stability of the suburbs and the responsibilities of a house and family" (Cheever, 1984, p.155) Cheever's protagonist Neddy not only physically remove himself from domestic confinement through extramarital affair, but also use alcohol to pacify himself internally.

The compulsive consumption of alcohol constitutes a continual yet unsatisfied search for relief from deep, inner feelings of anxiety and insecurity. Anxiety connoted a feeling of intense fear or dread without specific causes. Habitual drinkers feels vastly insecure and threatened from within. They constantly expect some adverse thing to happen but not knowing what it is. Anxiety is always

within them, unless they dissolve it in alcohol. (Osborn, 1951) The major difference between the normal social drinker and the habitual excessive drinker lay in the latter's attempt to escape from an intolerable anxiety. Cheever's middle class characters seldom find stability in their day-to-day lives though they are surrounded by substantial material wealth. Fear of the unknown future recurs alongside their commitment to improving external appearance, their suppression of real emotion, and their simple conformity of consumption.

It was commonly accepted that post-war era was a time of anxiety. The conquering of the Depression at home and totalitarianism overseas as well as the grandest economic advancement did not bring Americans mental stability, rather, it brought them fear and disappointment. This era was characterized by the fear of atomic bomb and international communism, by the rampant development of commercialism and materialism, and by the fragmentation of social and cultural life, which seemed to deprive people of coherent personalities and stable existences. Then, alcoholism became the manifestation of American troubled and rootless psyche. (Susman, 1989) Accordingly, with the growing influence of psychiatry, Americans increasingly turned inward, toward their inner selves, to cope with their inner instability. (Graebner, 1991)

For the inner self, the religious belief is obliged to be discussed here. The open scene of the story parodies the communal Eucharist, in which the celebrants are drinking wine. According to the doctrine of transubstantiation, the "substance" of the bread and wine in the Eucharist is changed into the body and blood of the risen Christ. However, there is no sense of selfless dedication or ultimate sacrifice here in the story. (Blythe & Sweet, 1984) Although the suburbanites have been to church in the morning, their sham of religious belief is emphasized by their post-worship litany of regrets about having drunk too much last night. The parishioner whispered "I drank too much last night", even the priest himself struggled with his cassock because of over-drinking. Throughout the journey home, Neddy renews his sagging spirits at the bar, which acts like his altar, and the bartender, who acts the priest, provides him drinks, the needed unction. Ultimately, Neddy replaces the principle of agape of Christ with Eros when he getting his ex-mistress' house. This Eros echoes the bronze statue of Aphrodite at the beginning of the story. Obviously, the influence of Christianity gets weaker and weaker. Christianity has lost its authority among people, who no longer abide by its disciplines for the sake of their own benefits. With the social economic and scientific advancement, many Americans began to question their traditional religious faith and even discarded it when they realized the necessity to focus on this mundane world rather than the celestial world promised after death. Less and less people

held the aspiration for salvation. Moreover, the Cold War deprived Americans of their optimistic self-identification with “the chosen people.” Counterculture movements emerged profoundly. Even the clergies came to realize the irresistible need to help their believers conquer difficulties in real life. Otherwise, their believers might easily turn to the secular government which could promote their welfares. Therefore, Modern Protestant theologians embarked on secular Christian faith. (Hamilton, 1995) They abandoned superstitious ingredients, trying to avoid the paradox with modern science; simplified the rituals to large extent; provided services like marriage counseling, catering for the different needs of social groups. The church functions as social organizations, laying stress on social reformation, among which, the Prohibition was its major influential contribution.

Without the traditional spiritual resource or guidance from the church, people turn to worship something else that is more practical, such as material or money, justifying their selfish desires. People tend to get lost in this blind seeking, or even reached the reverse of their ideal. That also shed light on their immersion in alcohol. Alcoholic men were troubled self-centered loners, incapable of forging sound friendships or community ties. They drank to soothe or suppress anxiety, only to remove him further from social and familial obligations. Cheever showed thorough and diversified familiarity with drinking due to his own experience. According to his own journal and his daughter Susan Cheever’s memoir, he suffered from alcoholism throughout most of his adult life. Fortunately, he got rid of alcoholism near the end of his life, but the characters in his early short stories have no such luck. Neddy’s excessive drinking intermingles with his failed class affiliation and sex-role identification, and that dooms himself to a life of tragedy and self-destruction.

CONCLUSION

The Swimmer presents the exploration of quest and illusion: the intense longings for wealth, for love, for excitement, for renewed youth, for escape from dreariness dissolve into nothingness abruptly. Cheever’s stories reflected the class affiliation of the typical shady characters— drunkards, adulterers, or thieves in the mid-20th century. As Cheever suggested, class identity was signified through not only one’s occupation but also the realm of genteel recreation and pattern of activities. His characters struggled to preserve the illusion of respectability even though they knew respectability was not happiness or even contentment. Rather, they used conspicuous leisure, domestic hospitality, and material acquisition to claim class affiliation and prestige, yet such worldly pleasures ultimately brought them family disintegration and spiritual corruption, making the object of their quest appear elusive.

The postwar alcoholic culture began to decline before the 1980s. Alcoholism no longer signified metaphorically as a pathological hallmark. It faced competition from other illnesses such as AIDS and drug use according to subsequent epidemiological and social changes. Though it is now regarded as a less than-urgent issue, or at least no more serious than many other problems, our knowledge of this issue can point us toward keeping such equilibrium, avoiding the worst excesses of consumption and self-indulgence.

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