

# The nature of man and relationships

Literature



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Yet, it is important to note that standard by which social affluence is never permanent. In the latter part of the story, Neddy was treated rudely by the Biswangers, those he initially considered as “ of lower class”, and he comes to realize that his social ranking has deteriorated with the procession of time, and the loss of his wealth. “ The Swimmer” narrates Neddy Merrill’s life, a man in his middle age who wants to preserve his youth and his health. At the beginning of the story, Neddy is in a cocktail hosted by his friends and is found enthralled by his idea of swimming in the country. As a member of the affluent community, he has everything he wants – wealth, social recognition, and the love of his family, friends, and even a mistress. Throughout the story, Neddy follows a chain of swimming pools in order for him to swim home. At times, he enters a neighbor’s backyard, sometimes he stops for a chat – in most of these cases he is having a drink – but he is always swimming the length of his neighbor’s pool. Initially, his visits are well-received but soon, the reader will realize that there’s something wrong with Neddy’s journey. As with many other stories written by John Cheever, “ The Swimmer” comes at a time when the author himself was fighting a crisis – alcoholism (Baym 1233). It depicts Cheever’s own struggles – his downfall from wealth to poverty (Baym 1232) and reflects the social values of the period, the surrealism of the rapid changes happening worldwide. Its main areas of interest included the nature of time and the connection between man and alcohol. I think one of the important morals that readers can derive from the story is the fact that the passage of time cannot be stopped. To illustrate using “ The Swimmer”, Neddy is found asking for a drink at the Sachses’ only to be told that there is no alcohol in the house because Eric, one of Neddy’s close friends, was rather sick. Yet, this is something that

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Neddy has no memory of, and will probably not remember. Time is irreversible - it will continue to pass regardless of whether or not people are ready for the changes that are going to happen. Yet the problem with Neddy was that he did not understand how quickly time was passing him by. He forgot about everything he valued in his life and was completely immersed with his goal of “swimming hole” and drinking. Yet, Neddy is not alone in his ignorance and negligence of time. Modern individuals forget that everything happens only once and they fail to make moments count. They repeat the same mistakes over and over and they fail to appreciate and acknowledge the gifts that life has to offer them. A quote from the book, which reflects Neddy’s distorted sense of time, includes the following statement: “Going out onto the dark lawn he smelled chrysanthemums or marigolds – some stubborn autumnal fragrance onto the night air, strong as gas. Looking overhead he saw that the stars had come out, but why should he seem to see Andromeda, Cepheus, and Cassiopeia? What had become of the constellations of midsummer?” (Cheever 1240). This shows how Neddy is unaware of how much time has actually passed, and that even the most important events (such as the selling of his own home) remained disregarded by him. It also reflects the way in which Neddy, like the most of us, did not really take the time to truly appreciate or realize the importance of small acts of kindness that passed him by, throughout his journey of life. Yet, even one who has fallen into alcoholism like Neddy, cannot escape from reality, and at one point or another, reality will catch up and remind him again of where he actually stands. Another important concept in the story is the effect of alcohol consumption which was widespread in the Sixties, on account of the relaxation of social rules. One must remember that Neddy’s

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inability to keep track of time can be attributed to his excessive consumption of alcohol, in his wish to prolong what he considers as the best of times, alcohol and swimming became his lifeline. Cheever's very own experience concerning alcoholism is a testament to its negative effects (Baym 1233). At the height of his personal crisis, Cheever lost important relationships, as well as his passion for writing. And yet, reading the story, we can see that alcohol use is widely accepted in Neddy's time. Alcohol was present in parties and other kinds of gatherings. As a matter of fact, alcohol was considered essential to maintain and enhance social status. We may say that this is still true at the present time – people use alcohol as an ice-breaker – a way people feel comfortable in a crowd of strangers. When we look at alcohol this way, we can say that alcohol was used to escape from reality. A line from Cheever's story which depicts this idea is, " He needed a drink. Whiskey would warm him, pick him up, carry him through the last of his journey, refresh his feeling that it was original, and valorous to swim across the county. Channel swimmers took brandy. He needed a stimulant." (Cheever 1238). In the latter part of the story, Neddy was slowly tiring of his goal of " swimming hole", yet drinking has helped him in pushing forward to his goal. In this line, we see that Neddy is somewhat dependent on alcohol consumption, and he uses it to escape the severity of his reality. He craved for it most so that he could fool himself and reconstitute his own feelings towards taking the ' swim across the country'. Another important subject discussed in the story is the nature of man, and his tendency to ignore reality, avoid responsibility, and take what he has been given for granted. As the story goes on, Neddy realizes that the idea with which he started his journey was crystal clear in his mind because he was initially content and

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happy with his life. Yet as his journey progresses, he started to carry a repressed sense of unhappiness which he continuously chose to ignore. In the end, he comes to see that all the problems he ignored did not disappear into nothingness, but rather evolves into a huge ball of troubles that eventually makes life a tad more difficult. The idea behind this concept revolves around the fact that everything we do has important consequences whose effects are not only limited to ourselves but can also include the people around us. This is because relationships are interdependent – what one does will inevitably affect another. While it was Neddy's decision to drink alcohol, he has inconvenienced a lot of people – his friends, his daughters, and even his mistress. Unfortunately, it was already too late for Neddy to take back his actions because he has lost everything.