

The country husband



THE COUNTRY HUSBAND John Cheever's *The Country Husband* was the third in a series of Shady Hill stories that examined the conflict people living in the suburbia might experience in reconciling their thoughts with the life around. In a highly aptly analysis of Cheever's work, Robert A. Morace explains what was the crux of Shady Hill stories when he writes that Cheever's characters "all face the same problem: how to live in a world that, in spite of all of its middle-class comforts and assurances, suddenly appears inhospitable, even dangerous, a world that appears to be growing more and more incoherent and preposterous everyday." (p. 509)

Francis, the leading male character of the story, suddenly finds himself in a situation where despite his efforts he cannot ignore the fact that something is missing in his suburban life. On the whole, it all seems quite right as suburban life might often look but underneath the surface lies a sense of restlessness as if there is a hole in the picture that needs to be filled. After an almost near-tragic experience on the plane, Francis returns home with a heightened sense of his mortality only to find that no one was really interested in that story. This leaves him with a sense of frustration and emptiness which makes him explore life outside his suburban existence. The reaction of his daughter Helen explains what really the core problem was. Helen, "doesn't understand about the plane crash, because there wasn't a drop of rain in Shady Hill" (*Shady Hill*, 54). She cannot fathom how her father could have been in an accident when weather was just fine in Shady Hill. This helps us understand what the issue is really. The people in Shady Hill cannot see beyond their own suburban boundaries. They are suffering from middle class complacency that doesn't allow them to see beyond the limited sphere of suburban lives. That obviously limits a person's view of the

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world and Francis slowly begins to realize it:

" Looking back over the recent history of Shady Hill for some precedent, ..."[Francis] found there was none. There was no turpitude; there had not been a divorce since he lived there; there had not even been a breath of scandal. Things seemed arranged with more propriety even than in the Kingdom of Heaven" (Shady Hill, 66).

This surreal picture was however sometimes disturbed by people or animals that couldn't gel well into the suburban structure. Two such people were Gertrude and Jupiter, a little girl and a black retriever, who were living lives on their own terms and in their own way. However Francis assumes this disturbance would not be tolerated for long. When he sees Jupiter " crash[ing] through the tomato vines with the remains of a felt hat in his mouth" (Shady Hill, 56), he calls it " an anomaly" (Shady Hill, 56), and suggests that " Jupiters days were numbered, The Wrightsons German gardener or the Farquarsons cook would soon poison him. Even old Mr. Nixon might put some arsenic in the garbage that Jupiter loved" (Shady Hill, 56). The life in suburbia was static, structured and surreal. This was however not real life and Francis desperately wanted to escape this tranquility to get in touch with reality. He finds this taste of the real world in his affair with the babysitter, Anne. It must be understood that he is not interested in Anne for her sake or doesn't even love her; all he needs is a sense of the world and of the life beyond his tranquil neighborhood. And this is what he found in his affair with Anne.

In the end Francis realizes why he has begun to dislike this life. Something tells Francis that " what seems to me to be really wrong with Shady Hill is that it doesnt have any future" (Shady Hill, 72). This is exactly what the

problem was since everything was so perfect now, people had no real desires and ambitions and this is what had alienated them from the world around. Shady Hill was too predictable, too boring and too clone-like. " for if he couldnt tell one person from another, what evidence was there that his life with Julia and the children had as much reality as his dream of iniquity in Paris or the litter, the grass smell, and the cave-shaped trees in Lovers Lane" (Shady Hill, 78).

Francis begins to hate the monotony of life in suburbia and the evilness that dwells beneath its cold tranquility.

Works Cited:

Robert A. Morace, " From Parallels to Paradise: The Lyrical Structure of Cheevers Fiction," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 35 (1989),

John Cheever, *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill and Other Stories* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958),