John Cheever: Parody and The Suburban Aesthetic

John Joseph Dyer

Shrewsbury, Massachusetts

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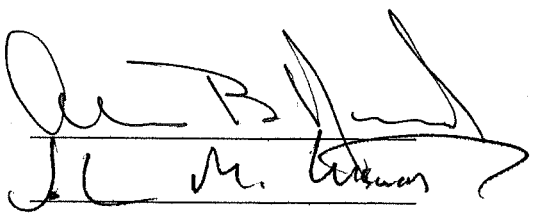

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John Cheever: Parody and The Suburban Aesthetic

John Cheever was able to portray the American suburbanite at mid-twentieth century as both valiant and pathetic at the same time. A character in one of Cheever's suburban tales maintains a constant balancing act between hope, ambivalence, and anxiety. He is tenuously poised between a willingness to accept his position in his genteel community and his suspicions of what might be the wrong way of life. These suburbanites are at once remarkably in control of their faculties and at the mercy of an uncertain destiny. This ability to capture this human dilemma and to combine it with one of the newest and most overlooked manifestations of the American landscape, suburbia, shows the power and insight of Cheever's art.

In three tales, "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill," "The Sorrows of Gin," and "Just Tell Me Who It Was," Cheever creates a dialogue between a number of literary and cultural forms that speak to the many different readers who saw Cheever's fiction in The New Yorker magazine during the fifties. Cheever addresses questions of human agency in the American suburbs of the mid-twentieth century in these stories, describing suburbanite as vacillating between opposite poles of control and confusion, between the dream of what the suburban lifestyle offers and the reality, fraught with problems, that questions that dream. This approach is more than simply an ironic or satiric attack on the American Dream, however. Cheever parodies the suburbs, and by examining this method in

relation to the author's subject-matter, we find that his critical view becomes complicated, and in many ways, complicitous.

Characters in these stories exhibit an awareness of themselves and their environment that is congruent with two of the major ideological traditions of American literature, the New England, or Puritan, conscience and pastoralism. Cheever takes these ideological traditions and effects them in the suburbs, showing how they coexist with modern suburban life. The author takes pains to show how important these traditions are, but he also makes a point to relate how distorted and often delusive they may be when they are applied to suburbia.

Cheever's characters have a New England conscience. They are acutely self-conscious, examining themselves according to a severe, Puritanical moral code. However, suburbia does not have the theological structure of early America. The peculiar thing about the suburbs is that there are few moral codes enforced there; suburbs are amoral places where people tend to ignore each other. As a result, the characters in these stories often feel isolated in their moral dilemmas. Consequently, the actions they take to alleviate their sufferings are often heedless of others, and therefore these actions generally do more harm than good.

The promise of pastoralism seems to be the characters' answer to this dilemma, but such idealism proves to be an inadequate solution to their problems. Cheever's characters deceive themselves into believing that if the suburbs fail to give one a sense of moral community, at least they can be places free of moral

corruption. The characters view suburbia as intrinsically good, as a haven from the vices of the city, but they forget that they cannot avoid all the impulses within themselves that might tarnish their community. Contrary to what they would like to believe, their lives are fraught with problems. The dream of recreating the world into an Eden is a delusion the characters use to avoid the reality that exists around them everyday. Often during their most intense bouts of guilt, or when their world seems most bereft, they imagine pastoral landscapes, escaping the temporal world in favor of a make-believe one. As a result of the tensions within and between modern suburbia, the Puritan conscience, and pastoralism, a deep ambivalence belies the happy facades of Shady Hill's homes.

Ambivalence is a well-documented aspect of The New Yorker. The magazine actively parodied the rising suburban middle-class that was coming to dominate the country during the post-war era. The New Yorker poked fun at the suburbs, while also acknowledging the demographic shifts that were expanding its readership outside of the city. Examining this form of parody is another way of looking at Cheever's art, one that reinforces an analysis of the tension and double-sidedness, the combination of pathos and ridicule, that marks his writing.

These stories appeared in The New Yorker during the fifties, and were collected in The Housebreaker of Shady Hill and Other Stories in 1958. All are set in the fictional town of Shady Hill, an affluent suburb somewhere between Albany and Weschester County. Shady Hill is linked by commuter train to New York City. Its inhabitants are Waspish, educated homeowners. To help take care

of their children when the father is in the city working, and when the mother is attending to one of the many community groups to which she belongs, they employ servants. Social life in Shady Hill revolves around cocktail parties, at one anothers houses, and at the country club.

The title story, "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill", is about Johnny Hake, a suburbanite who strikes out on his own business venture after he is fired from his job with a plastics manufacturer. His independent business does not go very well, however, and early in the story he is in dire financial straits. His wife and children sense his frustration, and the atmosphere in the house is tense. Eager to keep up appearances, however, he doesn't tell his wife about the oncoming crisis, and the couple go about their business in the neighborhood. At dinner with some neighbors, Hake hears Mrs. Warburton comments that her husband always carries around one thousand of dollars in cash in his wallet, a sum that Hake knows would put his business aright for a while until he could get back on his feet. A day or so later, Hake wakes abruptly in the middle of the night, puts on his clothes, steals into the Warburtons house, and takes Carl Warburton's wallet right from under the sleeping couple's noses.

The money eases Hake's economic burden, but life doesn't get any easier in the ensuing weeks. Hake fears that he will be found out, and suddenly, everywhere he goes, the world seems dissolute. A friend calls with a business proposition that will take advantage of a group of young investors, and in church,

he hears a rat ominously gnawing at the wood within a wall. If only he could live in a place where there were rolling green fields and pure air, he thinks.

Hake's problem is eventually resolved for him, however. The boss eventually calls Hake and asks him back to the plastics company. Hake takes out a nine-hundred dollar advance on his pay, and furtively places an envelope full of money on the Warburton's kitchen table. As Hake leaves their yard, a police officer drives up and asks why he is out so late at night. Hake tells the policeman that he is simply walking the dog, when, in truth, he doesn't have one. Appeased, the patrolman drives off. The story concludes with Hake whistling to himself in the night, satisfied with his lie.

The main character of "The Sorrows of Gin" is Amy Lawton, a fourth grader whose parents are very active in Shady Hill society. In fact, her parents are so popular and welcome at cocktail parties, they often run off to a neighbor's house for drinks as soon as Mr. Lawton arrives home from work. As a result of her parents' gregariousness, Amy has been raised primarily by the string of nannies and maidservants that come and go through the Lawton household. One night, when the Lawtons are away at a party, Rosemary, the current maid, tells Amy about her sister, who died from drinking. Rosemary says she would be proud of Amy if the little girl dumped her father's gin down the sink some time.

For the next few days life progresses a usual, until Rosemary returns home from a day-trip into the city. The maid gets off the train, and is drunk. She

is disheveled and smells of gin. Mr. Lawton, who is waiting with Amy to pick Rosemary up at the station, is extremely annoyed. When the trio return to the Lawton's house, Amy is sent to her room, and Rosemary, who has been fired, prepares to leave. In the house, Amy goes to the bar and dumps her father's bottle of gin down the sink. That night the Lawtons are again away at a party, and Amy is being watched by an old woman, Mrs. Henlein.

When Mr. Lawton returns later that night and finds his bottle of gin empty, he blows up at the sitter, accusing her of raiding his liquor cabinet. Mrs. Henlein is incensed that Lawton would even consider her to be a thief. There is an immense ruckus, and Amy, upstairs in bed, hears the strife. The adult world of alcohol and arguments confuses her, but nevertheless, she feels that it is her fault that this problem began, so she resolves to run away from home. The next day she goes to the station, and prepares to take a train back to the city, where the Lawtons used to live. The stationmaster calls and notifies Mr. Lawton of his daughter's plans, however. The story ends with Mr. Lawton seeing Amy at the station, asking himself how he can convince his daughter that home is the best place for her.

"Just Tell Me Who It Was" is the story of Will and Maria Pym. Will is a self-made man who grew up in Baltimore, worked many odd jobs, and now is a vice-president in his firm. He loves his Dutch Colonial house, and he is very proud of his ascendancy into Shady Hill. The gem of his life, however, is his wife Maria. He adores her. She loves him, too, but it is questionable as to whether or

not she has the character necessary for emotion as deep as his. Sometimes Will senses that his wife may not be able to reciprocate his affection, but these moments are few and far between, for his love always makes up where hers may be lacking.

The annual Apple Blossom Fete is approaching, and Maria is on the decorations committee. The fete is a costume ball, and it appears that it is going to be the same as it is ever year, until Will sees Maria's costume. It is very flattering, and there can be no doubt that in it Maria will be the object of many lustful glares. Will protests that the costume is too tight and too revealing. It is incongruous with his vision of his sweet and innocent wife. But Maria can't comprehend his reaction. She only wants to have a good time, she says. She cries and pleads that he allow her to wear the outfit. And Will relents.

At the fete, Will doesn't see Maria often because she is involved with organizing the entertainment. What he does see are many drunk, well-to-do people flirting with each other. He leaves early; and Maria doesn't come home until dawn. After this incident, Will begins questioning his wife's fidelity. He speculates that his intense love has blinded him. And he reasons that Maria has had plenty of opportunities to have affairs. His suspicions grow and the marriage seems doomed, until one morning when he punches the man he believes to be his wife's lover. After this brief altercation, Will feels vindicated, and he decides to make up with Maria by buying her an expensive gift.

The relationships featured in these three stories focus on the basic unit of Shady Hill, the family. "Housebreaker" is about the breadwinner, "Sorrows" is about the child, and "Just Tell" is about the husband-and-wife. We begin to understand how this basic unit operates by examining a fourth story from the collection, however. "The Worm in the Apple," more like a puzzle or a sketch of a story than a full-fledged tale, is a complicated parody of the methods the author uses throughout the three other narratives.

"The Worm in The Apple" is about the Crutchmans, a family that can best be described as ordinary. The story is narrated by an unseen guide who relates to the reader the Crutchmans life, starting from their courtship and ending with the growth and marriage of their children. We get a glimpse of Mr. Crutchmans stint in the navy, when for days he was adrift at sea on a raft after his ship had been sunk by the enemy. And we see how Mrs. Crutchman inherited a good deal of money from her father. The children's failures and success in school and college are up for our inspection, as well. The daughter marries the son of a gardener, and the boy serves out his time in the army in Germany. Although the family appears beyond reproach, throughout the tale the narrator persists in suggesting that there must be a blight on the Crutchmans' family history. The narrator speculates that Larry Crutchman's experiences in the navy might return to him in the form of nightmares; or perhaps Helen Crutchman might lord her money over her husband. But both of these hypotheses are proved false. Larry sleeps well, and Helen is a devoted wife and mother who generously contributes to the most respectable charities. The Crutchmans' probity doesn't discourage the critical

narrator, though. As the title suggests, there must be a worm in the apple. However, after many indictments and subsequent acquittals, we discover there isn't. At the end of the story we are informed that the Crutchmans are, and always will be, a happy and functional family.

The irony and satire intrinsic in the relationship between "The Worm's" narrator and the family history of the Crutchmans exemplifies Cheever's unstable critical stance towards his subject-matter, the suburbs. This literary posture is sardonic, wry, and witty, and is thus typical of what is often called the style of The New Yorker writer. However, Cheever transcended the magazine's characteristic ambivalence and made larger statements about the American Dream and the nature of the human experience.

In A Theory of Parody, Linda Hutcheon describes parody as something more complex than an imitation of another piece of art (or art form) for the sake of ridicule or amusement. Instead, Hutcheon views parody as a kind of copy that rewrites the original in a manner that is not necessarily mocking:

> In fact, what is remarkable about modern parody is its range of intent--from the ironic and playful to the scornful and ridiculing. Parody, therefore, is a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text...Parody is, in another formulation, repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity. (6)

This definition of parody allows us to see how "The Worm in the Apple" uses irony to imitate and invert the parodic critique raised in the other Housebreaker texts.

There are so many ironies in "The Worm," it is difficult to pin down exactly what the author is trying to say. Almost every aspect of the tale has a double meaning, and each double meaning, in turn, can be read ironically as well. Consequently, many key parts of the story deliver contradictory meanings. This sort of reading, of finding many different meanings in a story, is applicable to the other Housebreaker texts considered in this paper. All the Housebreaker texts are ironic and multi-faceted. However, the way Cheever criticizes suburbia in "The Worm" is an inversion of the methods he uses in the other stories; thus, "The Worm" is a parody of the other stories. If we are to understand how this story is a parody of the author's own method and style, we have to identify some of its many meanings.

The first irony is implied with the presumption that the Crutchmans are not what they seem: "one was bound to suspect a worm in their rosy apple" (Housebreaker 107). The author is perpetrating a fraud, however. Contrary to what the narrator leads us to believe, there is no proverbial 'worm' in the Crutchmans' 'apple' of a family. Thus we find a second irony. Although initially the Crutchmans appear to be the opposite of what they seem, ironically they aren't. Cheever thus begins the story with an ironical presumption and then ironizes it again by proving it false.

Third, although we discover there is no 'tragedy of the Crutchmans,' and that in fact their situation in the story is comedic, there is still a lingering trace of

confusion about why the family has been subjected to this scrutiny. The twists and turns of the above ironies do not satisfy our initial suspicions of the family, nor do they address the fresh distrust we have of our narrator. "What's the matter here?" we ask. Ironically, the tragedy of the story lies in the narrator, who, in assuming a posture akin to that of the Spanish Inquisition, leads us to feel guilt in our complicity with his untoward and deceptive aim of finding a worm. Why, we ask, must we seek for the rotten core of this happy family?

This uncovers the fourth and last irony. For a fleeting moment it is possible to feel compassion towards the Crutchmans, who, indeed, are a model family. However, in bringing us closer to them, this compassion also allows us to see them more clearly as real people, at which time we realize that, in ironic opposition to what the story explicitly says, there is actually something dreadfully wrong with the Crutchmans. They're boring.

In this story, Cheever parodies the methodology he uses to examine suburban families throughout the Housebreaker collection. "The Worm" pillories the stereotypical model family the Hakes, Lawtons, and Pyms represent, but it does so through means that invert Cheever's normal style. Instead of uncovering thievery, alcoholism or adultery, "The Worm" finds nothing unseemly about the Crutchmans. In finding nothing wrong with them, however, the story ironically finds just the kind of defect it was looking for in the first place. Thus, "The Worm" duplicates the thrust of the other stories, but in a contrary fashion. Irony is essential to this maneuver, as Hutcheon points out:

> Parody, then, in its "trans-contextualization" and inversion, is repetition with a difference. A critical difference implied between the background text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signaled by irony. (32)

What is the purpose of Cheever's parody, or, now that we have identified some of the readings of "The Worm," what is the story's critical attitude? To answer these questions we have to change gears and focus on the effects of the inversions and differences signaled by the many ironies in the story. This is where satire enters the equation. "The Worm in the Apple" parodies the narrators, families, and themes of the other stories, but the motive of this parody is satirical.

Satire, as Hutcheon describes, is didactic and extramural, like a lesson; it has a target related to something outside the story. Satire has a moral to tell. Parody, on the other hand, reflects a parallel text; irony signals a system of contrary meanings, in which an image means two different, and opposite, things within a particular story. Satire is a literary form in and of itself, but it also can qualify, or be qualified by, other forms. Thus, a parody may be satirical; it may critique something for the purpose of explaining a moral, or satiric, position (43). And it tends to do so through tropes and images that are ironic.

By subverting the reader's expectations of an exposé of the Crutchmans' faults, "The Worm" satirically highlights the fallaciousness of Cheever's (and our) impulse to search for the worm in the apple. Herein lies "The Worm's" lesson. It is a parodic attack on critics of the suburbs who seek the worm in the suburban

apple, and, as Lynne Waldeland notes, in this sense is it an "antidote" to the cynicism of the other stories (72). However, since the author isn't really advocating a reform of the Housebreaker narrators' critical stance towards the suburbs, this satire is ironic, too. After all, the Crutchmans are clearly boring, and, therefore, a critical defect has in fact been exposed. In this sense, "The Worm" is in league with the other Housebreaker stories, all of which do find a worm in the apple.

Accordingly, as Hutcheon's theory of parody implies when she writes that parody is "imitative," the parodic story tends to mirror many attributes of its parodied text(s), and "The Worm" and the other three stories share many traits. The Crutchmans are very similar to the other Housebreaker families except in that the author chooses not to focus on any of their many slight imperfections, leaving them dull instead. The little episodes of difficulty that we see in the Crutchmans' family history, such as the husband's time in the navy, or the marriage between their daughter and the gardener's son, for example--any one of these episodes is fare for a Cheever story. Conversely, the other three stories use irony as prominently as "The Worm in the Apple." For example, throughout the stories we are lead to believe that the misadventures that occur are cataclysmic, even though, ironically, the families don't change much. Hake doesn't really learn about rectitude and honesty and he winds up going back to his original job anyway; the Lawtons never discover who to blame for the disappearing gin, when the culprit is right under their noses; and Pym winds up forgiving his wife on the same shallow basis by which he previously loved her.

Thus, "The Worm" shows us how the author puts his families under the microscope. He raises a kind of critical looking glass on the suburbs, exposing their faults, but at the same time he self-effacingly tries to distance himself from this critical function. The author's attitude towards the suburbs is therefore quite nebulous. Little appears to really happen in these stories, yet because of the melodrama in the tales, the reader can be assured that something within them at least aspires to a greater importance. As discussed earlier, the more commonly held view on parody might lead us to consider that ridicule is the purpose of these stories. Indeed, the stories are about discovering worms in apples. But parody and satire are more complex than that, and while we may set the issue of simple ridicule aside, muddy waters remain. To address the question of Cheever's opinion of the suburbs, we start by considering what might have affected the artist's mind-set when he wrote these stories. First, we will consider the American intellectual traditions that Cheever makes use of as a parodist--Puritanism and pastoralism--and second, we will incorporate these traditions into the context in which these stories appeared.

Don Hausdorff's assessment of the overall editorial position of The New Yorker intimates the early-American traditions underpinning the magazine:

> Quietly but effectively, the New Yorker has been pioneering a different manner, one emphasizing moderation, in an almost eighteenth-century spirit, in all things. It stressed nuances rather than sharp contrasts, turning its well-tailored back on sweeping indictments. (81)

The moral perplexity of Cheever's characters is a result of the conflicts associated with this pioneering manner. The New Yorker's moderation Hausdorff discusses here is congruent with an eighteenth-century spirit of enlightened individualism, but there is another, earlier side of the eighteenth century represented in Cheever's fiction that Hausdorff fails to mention. The characters in the Housebreaker stories have what is called a New England, or Puritanical, conscience. The confluence of this enlightened individualism and the Puritanical conscience, which also espouses reserve and moderation, but is more oriented towards a zealously spiritual temperament, is the root of the conflicts in Cheever's stories.

The climactic moments in the three stories are cases in point. Each is a seemingly unpremeditated, physical action whose spontaneity is confusing, and therefore ripe for analysis. Hake wakes suddenly, and without reflecting, burglarizes his neighbor's house; Amy pours her father's gin down the drain without missing a beat; and Pym forgets himself when he rifles through his wife's shoes, doubting her innocence. Looking at these moments in terms of the Puritan conscience and The New Yorker's enlightened sense of moderation, we see how the characters are as confused by their actions as readers may be.

Cheever's perspective in each scene is that of a third person. He describes each moment as if he was a fly on the wall, emphasizing characters' outward, mechanical behavior rather than the thoughts behind their actions. Hake mentions the "lubricants" in his heart; we are told only that Amy almost cries after pouring

the gin down the sink; and Cheever focuses on the color of the shoes, rather than Pym's thoughts, when Pym goes through the closet. By focusing on the surface of the characters' actions, the author provides us with few clues to understand why they perform as they do during the three scenes. However, the automatic quality of the character's movements during these episodes beckons the reader's curiosity and judgment. This is a sign of the sophisticated moderation Hausdorff discusses. The scenes are self-evident, and they are not completely inexplicable, but we're puzzled and isolated by them nonetheless. Samuel Coale, in comparing Cheever to Nathaniel Hawthorne, expands on this point:

> [Cheever's] decorous tone, which can be mistaken for the glossy finish of suburban conventions in those tales seemingly mesmerized by the comfortable crises of New Yorker fictions, is often the result of a lyric and graceful repetition of images and objects; his plots, which reveal modern psychological existence as essentially chaotic and disconnected, are the results of the romancer's technique and vision that is intent upon breaking through the public display of social conventions and peering more deeply into the nature of man in both his moral and psychological dimensions. (206)

By looking deeper into the character's behavior after the scenes, the reader begins to see the moral and psychological dimensions behind the characters' actions. As penance for their momentary transgressions, the three characters level sweeping indictments against themselves in a fashion that, as Hausdorff noted, is not part of normal New Yorker protocol. Hake nearly damns himself, he is so guilty over stealing from his friends; Amy's overblown guilt leads her to run away; and, conversely, instead of guilt over an action, Pym's shame and paranoia lead him to strike his fellow commuter. As Austin Warren observes in The New England Conscience, the Puritan believes there is always room for a more

reverential way to live, and therefore is always cautious and watchful, looking towards the self, pointing out foibles in order to better optimize one's state of grace. Grace implies a selfless relationship with God--a person destined for salvation acts only for the glory of the Creator. Proof of one's closeness to God was found through revelation, when a person could selflessly say they had experienced the divine. This revelation was proclaimed to the community, and through it one was accepted into the Puritan church. Unfortunately, the self-scrutiny that drove this theology often created anxiety. As only the individual and God could experience the true inclination of one's soul, and since man was sinful by nature, the Puritan could never be absolutely sure whether an action was selfless or not. Consequently, the individual was left constantly second-guessing him or herself. For example, love of God, which was supposed to be unwavering, could easily be confused with cupidity or pride. It was the job of an upright Puritan to distinguish between these reverential and sinful impulses. This was the reason why Puritans so often kept meticulous journals, as Cheever did. A journal was a kind of private chronicle of the dialogue between oneself and God. The narrators and characters in the four stories have a similar acute self-consciousness, but of course they live in a time when the theology and institutions that supported that self-consciousness no longer exist. Instead of living in Colonial America, where one resided in a community where the New England conscience was affirmed by every aspect of the dominant culture, Cheever's character are left without any standards by which to gauge their actions.

In The Moral Order of a Suburb, M. P. Baumgartner documents this lack of moral standards in the suburbs of the post-World War II era. There are two general rules of conduct in suburbia, writes Baumgartner. First, suburbanites do not publicly take notice of a neighbor's activities. They make no moral judgments of a member of the community; in other words, "they mind their own business." Second, the suburbanite does not make public his or her own private activities. One is not supposed to be a nuisance to anyone else in the process of ignoring them. As a result, suburbs are considered peaceful, or boring, places because in an effort to not enact judgment on each other, households rarely interact with each other. Baumgartner finds that the primary rule in the moral order of a suburb is neglect. For example, in his study of a New York City suburb, when a member of a neighborhood did raise the ire of its inhabitants, neighbors rarely complained, and indeed would suffer all kinds of disturbances, such as loud cars or bright lights, for years without protesting to anyone. This is a far-cry from Puritan communities, where everyone was under the jurisdiction of the church authorities, and was subject to close scrutiny. Furthermore, this shows a difference between suburbia and Puritan communities in that the latter stressed the communal aspect, the shared culture, of its planned community, whereas the former stresses the independence of its component parts. In suburbia, nobody cares about any feelings of conscience one might have.

These three scenes invert the Puritan concept of self-scrutiny. The trouble the reader initially has in ascertaining the rationalizations behind the actions is a product of this inversion. The mechanical fashion the characters undertake in

these scenes, devoid of reflection or self-scrutiny, is amoral in nature. Consequently, the characters are left with a vacuum into which their Puritanical consciences must posit some sort of meaning. And to the Puritan, all amorality connotes an ignorance of God, and hence is sinful and is thus a reason to feel guilt. Instead of being times when the characters feel that the presence of God has been revealed to them, or that a state of grace has been achieved, these scenes are existential moments when the characters are detached from any sort of moral superstructure. This quality of alienation led Earl Rovit to compare The New Yorker's style and structure to Vorticism. The spontaneity of these scenes confuses the reader through an intricate use of irony, parody and satire, but their fleeting quality reduces them to New Yorker nuances, while hinting at something larger and more "sweeping." Thus the reader is purposely left with less information than is needed to understand the actions. A comparison might to seeing a furtively taken snapshot: the scenes are glimpses; they allude and imply through brevity, raising questions without offering answers: How can Hake steal from his friends when they are sleeping only a few feet away; has he abandoned his sense of community and friendship, is he really a common thief? How do Amy's feelings toward her father's self-destruction influence her, how important was the alcoholic maid in influencing her decision? Pym's jealousy--is his love real, or is it completely tainted by violence and his oppression? Would he feel the same way if a girdle hadn't been found at the country club party?

The pastoralism in these tales is another manifestation of the faith that supports the suburban myth, yet is challenged constantly by the alienation and

confusion Cheever's characters constantly feel. While Cheever's suburbanites may be spiritually alone, at least they try to enjoy their individualism in the American fashion, creating and placing themselves in a garden environment that is most conducive to healthful living. The author introduces his suburban settings with allusions to the Jeffersonian 'middle-state,' the term for the moderate, wholesome, and salubrious lifestyle of the early American yeoman farmer who knows and feels comfortable with his sense of place. In a pastoral setting, no one feels alienated from their environment. Furthermore, things are simple; the retrospective quality of the pastoral landscape allays the character's anxiety that a modernist style like Vorticism represents. In the Edenic pastoral landscape, there is no absence of a good, moral standard. One is satisfied with the processes of life, and the impulses of the body and mind need not be scrutinized. The stories, as the title "The Worm in the Apple" suggests, commence with dubious images of healthy physical conditions. "The Housebreaker" begins with an image of nakedness; a sentimental romance about a black horse, Black Beauty, begins "Sorrows;" and in "Just Tell," Will Pym is described in terms of rich foods, and of his girth, which he has been able to amass through his remarkable success. Cheever knows his characters' faith in pastoralism is nostalgic, however. The author always presents pastoralism more as a product of the imagination than of reality. Hake dreams of retaining the green fields of suburbia are what prompts him to steal; Amy Lawton's flight to the city is clearly an inversion of the pastoral myth. The little girl, growing up in the suburbs, believes the city is where people are more agreeable; when Pym carves his and Maria's initials into the tree in the park, Pym is beaming, Maria is bored. So from the start, even as he presents the reader with these idyllic

portrayals that are supposed to be real alternatives to his characters' confusion and guilt, he is setting them up for a fall.

William Whyte attacked the suburbs on precisely these grounds during the fifties. In The Organization Man, Whyte criticizes the feelings of homeownership and independence the post-World War II suburbanites felt by calling their pre-fabricated houses dormitories (267). The very term Organization Man pokes fun at this new, ascendant group. Instead of being farmers tied benevolently to the land, Whyte sees them as transients who must commute long distances to work at their middle-level jobs in the city. The strength of the yeoman farmer was that he was not part of an organization, worked where he lived, and depended on no one but himself. To Whyte, the suburbanite is the inverse of this early American figure. The suburban dweller is vulnerable and rootless in the sense that he or she is like a cog moving in someone else's machine. The suburbanite surrounds himself with what he believes to be the symbols of the leisure class, a car and lawn, when it is the upkeep of these very things that chains him to his job and belies his self-reliance.

Soon after acquainting us with the plenitude of the characters' households, Cheever undercuts his portrayal of the pastoral with a similar attitude in mind. These happy people don't just have enough security by way of pastoral plenitude. They have too much, and thus are at the whims of the many responsibilities and forces out of their control, some of which are within themselves. The characters' faults lie in their tendencies to exhibit pathological behavior in seeking out the

'middle-state' happiness that the pastoral represents. Hake so wants to succeed, he is avaricious; the Lawtons so want to look like a family while being swingers, they have isolated their child; and Pym's love of his wife is so intense, it's overwhelming. However, in order to acknowledge his appreciation for the bountiful 'middle-state' the suburbs of the twentieth century represent, as parody would have him do, yet still account for the Romantic idealism inherent in this vision that allows for its parodic perversion, Cheever falls back on New Yorker moderation. Here we see Cheever as the consummate fence-sitter. He criticizes the reactionary idealism that the suburbs grew out of, but he also acknowledges that idealism as a noble and respectable position. Therefore, he walks the line between deriding the suburban myth and exalting it. In deriding it, he attacks its unreality; in exalting it, he celebrates the power of mankind's imaginary vision. For Cheever, the true goal is to effectively function while living between these two extremes. In Shady Hill it is fine to have 'middle-state' ambitions of independence and uprightness, and yearnings and cravings can be compatible with those ambitions, but one must not forget about real life in attempting to actualize them. The dream of the pastoral can never be fully actualized. The consequence of such immoderation is to realize a dream, a recipe that amounts to delusion.

The three crucial scenes discussed earlier provide examples of this dynamic. All three characters act out of an impulse to make their lives better according to an imagined way of life. Hake steals in order to remain in crime-free suburbia; Amy dumps the gin, dreaming of a world where adults aren't alcoholic; and Pym's jealous rages are the outward symptoms of the internal battles between

what he perceives and what he envisions the world to be. Furthermore, each character acts out of a sense of nostalgia, which is a crucial aspect of the pastoral. Hake wants to retain his house and way of life, even as he sees it slipping away; Amy begins her subterfuge when she loses her friend the maid, and when she decides to stop she leaves for the city, where she used to live, resolving to stay with old friends or in a museum; and Pym's objective is to get what he perceives to be his old wife back.

However, the characters undertake these actions when they are subject to delusions. After the climaxes of the stories, and after the characters feel guilty about their actions in those climaxes, we find that the overarching familial conflicts that initiated those climactic scenes have not been laid to rest. Moreover, the attempts the characters make later in the stories to assuage their guilt do not address the real problems involved in their respective situations. Hake still is a dissembler, even after he has returned the money; he lies to the police officer. Amy's father will never realize that she doesn't feel that the Lawton house is her real home. Pym never thinks of Maria as anything but a trophy-wife, even after he attacks her supposed paramour. The actions are the symptoms, not the solutions, to the characters problems. They are signs that the characters continue operating under the delusions that engendered these crises in the first-place, even as they try to solve them. Therefore, just as the reader never entirely understands why these characters act the way they do during the scenes in question, the characters are so disconnected from reality, they are unsure of themselves as well.

Two things we can assume, however. First, all the characters act out of love. Hake doesn't want his wife and children to lose faith in him or to have to alter their lives. Amy loves and is afraid for her father; and Pym's problem is a surfeit of adoration for his wife. Second, all the characters' love is misguided. Johnny Hake is an example of a false sense of survival; Amy Lawton of misplaced charity; Will Pym of idolatry. Because they act under the best of intentions, we cannot completely write these characters off as fools, but we have to admit that their intentions are skewed. And here we see how important Cheever's lesson of moderation can be. An act of love, no matter how well-intentioned, is too precious not to be subject to a moderating influence.

The characters have hopes, and these are eloquently and passionately expressed, but they're overly ambitious and misguided from the start. Hence, their acts of unmoderated love become the sources of the characters' guilt. As previously suggested, the Puritan conscience is easily plagued by uncertain emotions concerning the stalwartness of one's inclination towards God. Warren describes this as an interior suffering, a feeling of dislocation and isolation from whatever 'good works' one might have performed out of a love of God (7). Similarly, the main characters are out of touch with actions that ostensibly were performed out of love for others. A few days pass before Hake realizes that it is his guilt that is making the world seem so dissolute; Amy remembers that she emptied the gin a day after the affair; and Pym rummages through his wife's shoes before realizing that he doubts the woman in whom he has always had complete faith. Each character is torn, at the mercy of their unwittingly mixed emotions,

and at the same time riveted by an urge for a better life manifested by a nostalgic pastoralism that looks backward in remembrance of better times and forward in hope of recreating those times.

Critics have said every Cheever story is about the Fall of Man. Each story seems to be about the introduction of vice into paradise, contrariness into order, immoderation into a state of balance, or of reality into delusion. Appropriately, the alternative to his characters' guilt-complexes is naiveté, or innocence, like that of the Crutchmans. The family who has no worm in their apple, in other words, has no snake in their garden. The Crutchmans so lack the qualities that make people real, however, and "The Worm" is so ironic in its blessing of their saccharine prelapsarian existence, that we have to question if the author views Eden as anything more than a dream, and a boring one at that. In Cheever's world, it is natural to be deluded by one's hopes and fears. Hence, "The Worm" ends with the hypertrophied "happily, happily, happily, happily," rather than "Happily ever after." The latter cliché is just as unreal and fanciful as any, but it is a common fantasy everyone wishes they could believe in.

Because these characters strive against forces they only partially comprehend, I'm led to compare them to tragic heroes. But in a tragedy, there is catharsis, and as mentioned earlier, there is no such purgation in these stories. As Baumgartner documented in The Moral Order of a Suburb, conflicts stay bottled up in suburbia, and these stories corroborate this thought. This reaffirmation of the status quo is a comedic tool. Therefore, Cheever stories are tragicomedies. As

another example of the neither-fish-nor-fowl quality of the author's work, this point reaffirms Cheever's double-coded, parodic method.

Don Hausdorff, writing on The New Yorker, describes this double-coded method as prevalent in the pages of the magazine, even in the editorial and business departments:

> Almost from the beginning, two ambivalences were present. The New Yorker poked fun at conspicuous consumption, even while it paraded numerous examples of it, in columns and advertisements, in every issue. And while the magazine's humorists bemoaned the demise of "enlightened individualism," in the city and nation, its own efforts often were largely the product of group process and editorial conference. (75)

Hausdorff adds that this double-identity has its shortcomings, however. The cold, reflective New Yorker style was well-suited to irony, and it could be used brutally to shed light on the absurdities of modern life, but such a style doesn't discriminate between the pedestrian and the lofty, the important and the unimportant, bringing that above-mentioned tension to a new level:

> As for what one critic of advertising called its worst sin, the "systematic manipulation of anxieties," the New Yorker managed to hit at such trauma even while cushioning its barb with cuteness: one cartoon presented a grinning door-to-door salesman saying, "Good morning, sir. Have you given thought to the possibility of complete paralysis?"...An important result of this rounding-out of character and the resultant softening of moral overtones, was that distinctions of a moral sort became an increasingly difficult to recognize, not unlike the marginal differences between competing brand names on virtually identical products. (81)

Dwight Macdonald, cultural critic and formerly an editor of The New Yorker, commented on the magazine's blending of distinctions in terms of parody. Macdonald observed that "A particular combination of sophistication and

provinciality is needed for good parody, the former for obvious reasons, the latter because the audience must be homogenous enough to get the point" (567). When he wrote this in his 1960 anthology of parodies, Macdonald was commenting specifically on The New Yorker, where the Housebreaker stories first appeared in the mid fifties. Not only were stories like these a mixture of sophistication and provincialism; according to Macdonald, they had definite political and ideological leanings:

> The appearance of The New Yorker, with its defiant "Not Edited for the Old Lady From Dubuque"--a slogan long forgotten, since the magazine's readership has for two decades been as much outside New York as inside the city, a change that does not signify a victory for the provinces but just the reverse--crystallized this dominance of the urban wits. (567)

Macdonald's insistence on the "dominance of the urban wits" would lead us again to believe that Cheever's New Yorker stories ridicule the American Dream of a house and lawn in the suburbs. However, the paradox behind parody of this sort complicates matters. As Hutcheon remarks, because it is simultaneously directed towards two different audiences, parody both respects and lampoons what it parodies (74-5). In the case of The New Yorker, these two audiences are a provincial one that is ridiculed, and a sophisticated one that gets the joke. This relationship prompts Hutcheon to observe that due to its implicit reliance on the integrity of its subject, parody ironically (self-reflexively) undermines the parodist, who becomes, in this light, parasitic, or dependent on what is parodied:

This contradictory reaction [to satiric parody] is not...just a matter of personal taste. Its roots lie in the bi-directionality of the legitimacy of parody itself. The presupposition of both a law and its transgression bifurcates the impulse of parody: it can be normative and conservative, or it can be provocative and revolutionary. (76)

The parodies appearing in The New Yorker depend less on Macdonald's snobbery than on a tension within parody, between the parodist and that which is parodied--in this case, between anti-suburban wits and suburbanite readers. We might describe the split in the author's ideological allegiance by saying that his realism, albeit parodic, is the provincial, respectful agent in a Cheever story, whereas the shot of satire is more in league with the urban wit.

Hutcheon's discussion of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of parody as the 'carnivalesque' provides us with the means to recognize the deeper levels of Cheever's project. Bakhtin's 'carnival' refers to the Renaissance and medieval carnival, times during which social hierarchies were periodically turned on their heads. In the carnival, for instance, a fool was king for a day and ecclesiastical rules were temporarily suspended. Bakhtin saw these periods as instances of an alternative culture within a culture, the former existing in opposition to the latter's routine way of life (72). Although viewed by religious authorities as heretical, the carnival was allowed to proceed for two reasons. First, it was seen as a social safety valve, an opportunity for the peasants to divest themselves of excess energy and frustration, and, second, the carnival was consecrated by tradition. Thus, although the carnival thumbed its nose at the mores of the prevailing social order, it did so with that order's tacit blessing. Hutcheon: "The motivation and the form of the 'carnivalesque' are both derived from authority: the second life of the

carnival has meaning only in relation to the official first life" (74). Bakhtin applied this historical model to parodic fiction. He theorized that a parody and its subject conduct a dialogue, like the carnival and everyday life. The two are radically separate, yet the common ground they share mediates their distance (72).

However, if Bakhtin's 'carnivalesque' relies on an ascendant folk culture, how can we apply his theory to Cheever's mode of parody? Clement Greenberg answers this question in his essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in which he equates twentieth-century popular culture with folklife of the pre-industrial era. Although talking about the mid nineteenth century, Greenberg describes social conditions very similar to those experienced one hundred years later when Americans migrated from the cities to the suburbs. Cheever's suburbanites, like Greenberg's peasantry, leave their ancestral environments in an effort to make new lives:

> The peasants who settled in the cities as proletariat and petty bourgeois learned to read and write for the sake of efficiency, but they did not win the comfort necessary for the enjoyment of the city's traditional culture. Losing, nevertheless, their taste for folk culture whose background was the country-side, and discovering a new capacity for boredom at the same time, the new urban masses set up a pressure on society to provide them with a kind of culture fit for their own consumption. To fill the demand of the new market, a new commodity was devised: ersatz culture, kitsch, destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide. (12)

The ersatz culture of suburban America represents a new manifestation of the kitsch that springs up after such demographic shifts.

Greenberg views publications like The New Yorker as contemporary kitsch: mass produced, and innovative and stylish, yet consistently pedestrian (although its trendy, kitsch never seems to change, and it is always sure to appeal to the greatest amount of consumers). The difference therefore between the kitsch that Greenberg discusses and Bakhtin's folk culture is that when Greenberg is talking about mass, kitsch culture, he is talking about the dominant culture. Greenberg laments the fact that the hegemony of the class that creates high art has given way to the middle-class kitsch that comprises the ruling culture of the United States in the post-war era. Thus, in Greenberg's America, the urban wits are the ones who must subvert the dominant culture. Macdonald argues that the New Yorker carries out this subversive function. And as New Yorker stories, Cheever's tales have many instances of this critique of mass culture. Hake works for a plastic manufacturer; Mr. Lawton describes the world outside Shady Hill as smelling and tasting of plastics; and Maria Pym experiences her disillusionment in terms of the costumes and paper apple blossoms she made for the country club fete. However, as Greenberg notes, magazines like The New Yorker are examples of kitsch, even it they profess to be the representative of a high culture. Looking at Cheever's stories from this angle, we find that the author is not subverting the dominant popular culture at all, but rather is conducting a complicitous critique of that popular culture. In other words, he thinks of himself as subverting the dominant kitsch culture, but in fact is very much a part of that culture. This is how Bakhtin describes the 'carnival,' as a time when one class ostensibly critiques the other, although really the 'carnival' is a product of society as a whole. We can see this point more clearly is we consider a typical Cheever story as a

'carnivalized' rendering of the popular fifties television program Leave it to Beaver.

The average Cheever tale turns the world of the Cleavers on its head. Such an exercise produces an inversion of the greater society Leave it to Beaver mirrors. A Cheever story is exact and scrupulous in the way it reproduces the details of the Cleavers' existence, but the perspective is reversed. In a Cheever tale, things are not so idyllic as they are with the Cleavers, but the trappings are the same. The children are well-dressed, and the house is clean, and the father is the breadwinner, but when controversy develops, people are not quite so considerate. Cheever thus implicitly pays homage to that typical American family the Cleavers (or Crutchmans) represent by casting them in his farcical production. But of course he also undercuts this admiration by distorting the image he has chosen to reproduce.

This method complicates Cheever's relationship with critics like Macdonald who think of parody in terms of the triumph of one segment of society over another. By making light of the urban wits' antithesis, the provincial middle-class, Cheever both allies and distances himself from a critic like Macdonald when the latter spoke of The New Yorker in terms of a triumph of the urban wits. Cheever takes the Cleavers, and the status quo they represent, and makes a spectacle out of them, thereby making the standard American family the butt of a joke. Instead of the Beaver running away from home in order to avoid punishment for a trivial matter, thus reinforcing his innocence, Amy Lawton flees Shady Hill

because she is too aware of the fast-track lifestyle of her parents. As opposed to rarely mentioning Ward Cleaver's job, Cheever exaggerates the double-life of the breadwinner in "The Housebreaker." And instead of presenting Maria Pym as a June Cleaver picture of sobriety and responsibility, Cheever makes sure we question her character.

In using parody in this 'carnivalesque' manner, Cheever blurs hegemonic distinctions between high and low, at once challenging the position of the dominant middle-class, and concomitantly exploding the premise on which Macdonald's New Yorker stands. On one hand Cheever subverts the dominant middle-class as an urban wit might, but on the other, because he is a 'carnivalesque' parodist, the author ties himself to what he parodies, converting the bully pulpit of The New Yorker into a parasitic agent that in fact needs the Old Lady From Dubuque in order to survive. What does this mean for Cheever, however, who could not have supported himself as a writer if not for Eustace Tilley?

Cheever has an affinity with and distance from his subject-matter, and a similar invidious relationship exists between him and the urban wits who belong to The New Yorker's 'sophisticated' readership. The many ironic readings of "The Worm" exemplify this multifariousness. On one hand, "The Worm" is an indictment. On the other, it is an apology. Cheever seems to be attacking and agreeing with everyone at once, with those who see the Crutchman's as possibly hypocritical, or as boring, and with those who would say there is nothing wrong with an ostensibly happy family.

Consider how this split conviction affects Cheever's depiction of the suburbs. Obviously many of the Housebreaker's characters are members of some sort of 'carnival': they're merrymakers and performers who transgress the social rules they nominally try to respect. Furthermore, these transgressions occur most often in connection with times of celebration. Hake literally leads two lives, one as a man in a gray flannel suit, and one as a thief who chooses his first victims from those present at a cocktail party; as Amy notes, for example, her father rarely follows the ceremonious advice he constantly gives her, and when the adults are drunk at their cocktail parties, the girl thinks they resemble actors in a play; lastly, it is a raucous party at the country club that suggests to Pym that his wife has been having an affair. However, although frivolity almost always is conjoined to a dilemma in these stories, the festivities still retain the air of good, clean fun. Unlike Bakhtin's 'carnival,' the bourgeois way of life undergoes no outward metamorphosis on any grand scale. Any instances of upheaval are the characters' private, psychological affairs. In fact, these scenes could not usher in the individual problems of the main characters unless the backdrop of cocktail parties and country-club settings established a some sense of community in Shady Hill from the outset.

As discussed briefly above, the greatest irony of these stories is that the social order doesn't change drastically despite the turmoil the characters go through. This portrayal of suburban life is consistent with many sociological studies of the fifties, such as Whyte's The Organization Man, that popularized the

notion of the rising housing developments as being blighted by a startling conformity. But despite its avowed social homogeneity, and stagnation, the suburbia presented in these tales does correspond to a type of 'carnival;' through alcoholism, theft, and violence, Cheever at least hints at impeaching 'the organization.'

The ambivalence towards the suburbs resulting from the interaction of irony, parody, and satire found in "The Worm" and other Housebreaker texts is thus not only found in the moral perplexity that marks Cheever's characters; it is part of the political context of the stories' publication.

Cheever satirizes the false hopes and bizarre, but understandable, rationalizations of his characters--their fears and desires are outrageous and overblown, but their craziness is kept within its proper domain, in the family and community, and within the confines of the commute and the cocktail party, to the point that their common daily experiences become so manneristic they are elevated to the status of archetypes, rather than that of stereotypes. The moments when Hake burglarizes; when Amy pours the gin down the sink; and when Pym strikes the man whom he believes to be his wife's lover are consequences of so many prototypical forces, they become expressions of more than just petty fear or frustration.

In elevating these characters' common predicaments to epic status, Cheever parodies the popularly held conception of the suburbs via melodrama. Hutcheon's description of the mock epic is pertinent here: "The mock epic did not mock the epic: it satirized the pretensions of the contemporary as set against the

ideal norms implied by the parodied text or set of conventions" (44). In light of this description of the mock-epic, Cheever's fiction amounts to a kind of alternate view on the suburban lifestyle, one with as much life and nebulousness as the original one from which it springs.

The moral of the story is that illusions and ideals of the good life may be a chimera, and can be tempting, and dangerous, but without them the world would be a sad place indeed. It was in this manner that Cheever wrote, as a kind of double agent testing the falseness and authenticity of bourgeois dreams. Take, for example, an entry in Cheever's, dated 1948:

> Last night, folding the bath towel so the monogram would be in the right place (after reading a piece on Rimbaud by Zabel), I wondered what I was doing here. This concern for outward order--the flowers, the shining cigarette box--is not only symptomatic of our consciousness of the cruel social disorders with which we are surrounded but also enables us to delay our realization of these social disorders, to overlook the fact that our bread is poisoned. I was born into no true class, and it was my decision, early in life, to insinuate myself into the middle class, like a spy, so that I would have an advantageous position of attack, but I seem now and then to have forgotten my mission and to have taken my disguises too seriously. (16)

In a way, Cheever's stories are the delusions and dreams of the most enigmatic and ambivalent actor of all. The outward signs of order in the drama of his journal entry are, ironically, the most telling examples of his disorder. The toiletry and coffee table articles that serve as the origin of this psychologically harrowing chiasmus are signs of the absurdity, of the epic melodrama, of his setting. The vacuum of his classless background, and the seduction he has fallen into, his ambivalence about the world he was going to attack through satire, and the feeling that presently he is a failure of a double-agent behind enemy lines, are

indications of the difficulty of his role. And the fact that he is where he wants to be for this exercise, but that his sustenance is poisoned now that he is there, is proof that the joke is on him.

"The Housebreaker of Shady Hill" and Nakedness: Cheever's Puritanism and The Pastoral

"The Housebreaker of Shady Hill," from which John Cheever's 1958 collection of stories derives its name, is the best example of the author's use of the Puritan conscience and the pastoral in his fiction. The primary image in the story is that of nakedness. Cheever introduces nudity in the opening scenes of the narrative and then plays with this trope in order to make statements about his characters' feelings of innocence and guilt.

In one sense, nakedness is a sign of the unadorned nature that is part of the literary convention of pastoralism. Throughout the story the protagonist, Johnny Hake, desires to return to the days of his youth, and specifically to his vacations in the countryside, when he was carefree and innocent. When he expressees these desires, he day-dreams of an imaginary and timeless paradise. In this light, nakedness refers to the shamelessness of the idyllic, prelapsarian, pastoral landscape. However, Hake at times also feels intense guilt in the story. In this sense nakedness is a way the reader can think about the main character's conscience, which is laid bare to an inspection comparable to the Puritanical concept of self-scrutiny described by Austin Warren in The New England Conscience.

The three points of our concern in this tale are the moments when Hake steals from the Warburtons, the guilt that results from this burglary, and the strange conclusion of the story.

Hake finds out about Carl Warburton's money when Mrs. Warburton mentions her husband's wallet. The Hakes and a number of other Shady Hill families are over at the Warburtons for dinner. It is late, and Carl has not yet returned from work:

> Sheila [Warburton] was worried. "Carl has to walk through a terrible slum to get to the station," she said, "and he carries thousands of dollars on him, and I'm so afraid he'll be victimized...." [author's italics](8)

Carl returns unscathed, and the night continues without interruption. The Hakes goes home, and Johnny goes to bed and sleeps, dreaming first of plastic wrap:

> I had been dreaming about wrapping bread in colored parablendeum Filmex. I had dreamed a full-page spread in a national magazine: BRING SOME COLOR INTO YOUR BREADBOX! The page was covered with jewel-toned loaves of bread--turquoise bread, ruby bread, and bread the colors of emeralds. (8)

Then, of his mother, with whom he is estranged:

> She sent me through college, arranged for me to spend my vacations in pleasant landscapes, and fired my ambitions, such as they are, but she bitterly opposed my marriage, and our relations had been strained ever since...I wanted to do it all over again in some emotional Arcadia, and have us both behave differently, so that I could think of her at three in the morning without guilt, and so that she would be spared loneliness and neglect in her old age. (9)

Then, finally, Hake has a coughing fit and must get out of bed. Standing in the bathroom, he is reminded of death: "I was suddenly convinced I was dying of bronchial cancer," and then he remembers his failing business:

> I tossed my cigarettes into the toilet (ping) and straightened my back, but the pain in my chest was sharper, and I was convinced that the corruption had begun. I had friends who would think of me kindly, I knew, and Christina [his wife] and the children would surely keep alive an affectionate memory. But then I thought about money again, and the Warburtons, and my rubber checks at the clearing house... (10)

After this plot-line, which goes from plastics, to a nostalgic longing, to a fear of death, and finally to a fear of insolvency, Hake promptly gets dressed, sneaks into the Warburtons, and steals Carl's wallet. By analyzing the succession of thoughts leading up to this theft, we can see much of what lies behind the hopes and fears of one of Cheever's suburbanites.

We know that Hake is worried about money, and that he hasn't told his wife about their financial troubles. An analog to this anxiety about problems with money is Sheila Warburton's fear of her husband being mugged in the city. The Warburtons have money, and their money is what separates them and the other suburban dwellers from the slum that exists in the city. This is the tacit backdrop to Hake's financial troubles, the conflict between the dissolute, victimizing city and the theoretically secure suburbs.

Second, Hake's job with the plastics business gave him the money that enabled him to reside in his suburban haven. The loss of his job, and his

subsequent failure as an independent businessman, is the root of his anxiety. Hake equates plastic with health and wealth. He thus dreams of food in terms of precious gems. Furthermore, his dream of the plastic-wrapped bread takes the form of an advertisement. The bread is something that can be his if he has the money to buy it, which implies that it is something that he does not have in the context of the dream. And because he does not have the bread now, it is an enchanted article, seen as an advertisement, which makes things appear more attractive than they really are. The shiny bread is thus both a sign of the wealth he once had access to, and of his nostalgic desire to reclaim that wealth.

Hake's reaction to the possibility of losing these adornments forever is to remember his youth, of his mother and the vacations he used to go on. He wants to start over in an Arcadia, a clear allusion to the myth of the pastoral. As his coughing-fit reminds him of his own mortality, and of the end of the possibility of ever rectifying his tense relationship with his mother, however, he is brought back to the present, where he realizes that he has got to have money if he is going to retain his lifestyle.

Hake has somewhat contradictory emotions at this point. His mother was the person who enabled him to achieve his station in life. She educated him, fired his ambitions, and he wants to keep the house and family he has built with the tools she gave him. However, at the same time, Hake is not pleased with the changes his life has undergone as a consequence of his success. His marriage has caused a rift between him and his mother, for example, and now, while he is living

in Shady Hill, he is cut off from her. To regain the love of his mother, he would have to change his lifestyle, something which he refuses to do, although retaining that lifestyle is also the source of much of his guilt. Hake thus feels regret for leaving behind the very things which have allowed him to push forward in his life. He cannot go back for them without altering everything he so wants to retain, although back in time are the only things that can fully perfect his present life.

It is in this state that Hake gives into his impulses and robs the Warburtons. Hake seems unconcsciouss of himself during these scenes. He narrates his actions from the past-tense, looking back himself at this time as if he was a fly on the wall: "I could hear the sound of deep breathing. I stood in the doorway for a second to take my bearings. In the dimness I could see the bed, and a pair of pants and a jacket hung over the back of a chair (11)." Furthermore, Cheever focuses on outward description in this scene. The most the reader sees within Hake are the mechanical functions of his body: "All my saliva was gone, the lubricants seemed to drain out of my heart, and whatever the juices were that kept my legs upright were going (11)."

But his theft clearly engenders the opposite of everything his suburban-pastoral dream represents. In stealing from his neighbors, he is victimizing them, bringing the corruption of the city into his suburb. Instead of recreating an Arcadia, a region of simple pleasures and delights, Hake's theft has drastically complicated his life. The drive for naked, unadulterated simplicity has ironically turned into an indulgence of shameless compulsion.

After the theft, Hake begins to notice many of the more corrupt aspects of life that formerly didn't attract his attention, including those corrupt aspects of himself:

> I looked at the paper. There has been a thirty-thousand-dollar payroll robbery in the Bronx. A White Plains matron had come home from a party to find her furs and jewelry gone. Sixty thousand dollars of medicine had been taken from a warehouse in Brooklyn. I felt better at discovering how common the thing I had done was. But only a little better, and only for a short while. Then I was faced once more with the realization that I was a common thief and an impostor, and that I had done something so reprehensible that it violated the tenets of every known religion...My conscience worked so on my spirits--like the hard beak of a carnivorous bird--that my left eye began to twitch, and again I seemed on the brink of a general nervous collapse. (13)

Hake suffers from what Warren calls the 'New England, or Puritan, conscience,' which "is not the mark of those who suffer, but of those who suffer interiorly from their own consciences. They are tormented by doubts and scruples; feel the mixed--and hence impure--motives which prompt them to perform 'good works.' (7)" In this case, Hake's 'good work' is anachronistically his theft, which was enacted for good ends, but undertaken through illicit means. We might say that his sense of security dominated him so during the crime, he became avaricious.

His conscience is naked in the sense that it cannot conceal itself from its own scrupulousness. Hake himself undeniably knows the wrong he has committed. Because he is so tormented inside, everything he witnesses is tainted by his perception which, as part of himself, projects that contamination onto the outside world. Consequently, this change in Hake's reality alters everything about

him. He cannot disguise an outward demeanor that reflects an inward sin. Thus, even though Hake never tells his wife explicitly that he has stolen the Warburtons' money, she senses that he is "not himself (26)."

One would think that these many examples of Hake's conscience in the story would inspire him to somehow make amends for his crime. Eventually it is something outside of Hake that causes him to change, however. All through his travails, Hake continues to scope out his neighbor's houses, and one day he does actually attempt a second burglary. During this second attempt, before Hake enters the Pewters' house, it starts raining. Caught in the rain, Hake has a revelation:

> I was not trapped. I was here on earth because I chose to be. And it was no skin off my elbow how I had been given the gifts of life so long as I possessed them, and I possessed them then--the tie between the wet grass roots and the hair that grew out of my body, the thrill of my mortality that I had known on summer nights...I looked up at the dark house and then turned and walked away. (29)

This baptism seems to be the end of Hake's problems with his conscience. He apparently has won out over the anxiety of relinquishing his suburban way of life. Perhaps at this point in the story he has transcended the fears of dropping down on the suburban social ladder. Luckily, at this time, as if it was destined, Hake winds up regaining the means to keeping the suburbia he so feared losing. The old boss at the plastics manufactory calls and offers Hake his job back. The new Hake takes out an advance on his pay, and resolves to return the Warburtons'

money. When he does, something happens that complicates our appraisal of Hake's conversion:

> There was no sense in overdoing prudence, and I went around to the back of their house, found the kitchen door open, and put an envelope on the table in the dark room. As I was walking away from the house, a police car drew up beside me, and a patrolman I knew cranked down the window and asked, "What are you doing out at this time of night, Mr. Hake?"
>
> "I'm walking the dog," I said cheerfully. There was no dog in sight, but they didn't look. "Here Toby! Here, Toby! Here Toby! Good dog!" I called, and off I went, whistling merrily in the dark. (30)

This curious episode renders problematic Hakes' new-found probity. Although we are supposed to believe Hake underwent some kind of conversion, since he does not rob the Pewters,' his interaction with the patrolman tells us he still has an inclination to conceal the naked truth. Hake is still an impostor of sorts, thief or not. Hence, he utilizes his skills at dissembling to solve a problem that began with dissembling. He illicitly enters his neighbor's house for a second time, albeit this time to repay, rather than steal.

Hake's crisis of conscience appears rather superficial. After all, it was rather easily dispelled soon after he got his job back. In truth, Hake was operating under delusions from the very start, and his crisis of conscience brings him no closer to really understanding why he was ever prompted to steal. It was a delusion for Hake to think that stealing money would somehow solve his financial problems, a fact highlighted by the farrago of feelings concerning death, his mother, and the pastoral that occurred previous to his theft. And it is similarly a delusion to think that returning the money will really make life any better; Hake is

a false convert. He ends the story exactly as he began it, talking to himself in the dark.

"The Sorrows of Gin" and The Consciousness of A Child

In "The Sorrows of Gin," John Cheever writes on the experiences of a suburban child. In his portrayal of a little girl in Shady Hill, the author comments on the rootlessness and dislocation felt by someone who is not part of the predominant social life of suburbia. To a child who plays only a marginal part in her parents' cocktail and dinner parties, the festivities of adults seem more like a confusing set of games than something anyone would want to grow up into.

The three points of concern in this tale are the moments when Amy pours her father's gin down the sink, her decision to run away from Shady Hill for the city, and the conclusion of the story, when Amy's father comments on the emptiness of travel.

The idea to pour her father's gin down the sink comes to Amy from her friend, Rosemary, a cook. The two are talking one night when the Lawtons are out, and Rosemary, taking up the subject of Amy's parent's drinking, relates to the little girl the story of her sister, who was an alcoholic:

"Gin makes some people gay--it makes them laugh and cry--but with my sister it only made her sullen and withdrawn. When she was drinking she would retreat in to herself. Drink made her contrary. If I'd say the weather was fine, she'd tell me it was wrong If I'd say it was raining, she'd say it was clearing. She'd correct me about everything I said, however small it was. She died in Bellvue Hospital one summer when I was working in Maine. She was the only family I had." (88)

A number of elements in this passage relate to other facets of the story. First, Rosemary says alcohol alters people's personalities. Second, it makes them critical. Third, it tears families apart.

At many times in the story does Amy notice how alcohol makes adults act strangely. Her parents seem to behave so artificially when under the influence of alcohol, the little girl compares them and their friends to actors:

> Amy had once seen Mrs. Farquarson miss the chair she was about to sit in, by a foot, and thump down onto the floor, but nobody laughed then, and they pretended that Mrs. Farquarson hadn't fallen down at all. They seemed like actors in a play. (97)

This willful suspension of social conventions is a use of parody similar to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of parody, the 'carnivalesque.' Through gin can Cheever induce his characters to abandon the usual social conventions of suburbia, while still keeping that abandonment within the parameters of the traditional cocktail party, the time of 'carnival' in Shady Hill when deviation from social norms is allowed. Alcohol is the catalyst that turns the living rooms of Shady Hill into places where one may fall flat on one's face and not be criticized for lacking decorum.

Amy's parents are always pointing out ways for her to correct her appearance, straighten her posture, and act more mannerly:

> like all the advice he [her father] gave her, it was superfluous. They were always at her. "Put your bicycle away." "Open the door for grandmother, Amy." "Feed the cat." "Do

your homework." "Pass the nuts." "Help Mrs. Bearden with her parcels." "Amy, please try and take more pains with your appearance." (86)

Because Amy commonly witnesses these fastidious adults acting in a slovenly manner, there is a gulf of sorts between her and her parents. Amy doesn't initially realize that her parents explicitly have a double-standard, but in her own way she knows that they tell her to do things while doing the opposite themselves. When Rosemary comes back from the city intoxicated, Amy has clear proof of an adult's hypocrisy. Days earlier Rosemary had been delivering an invective against gin, and suddenly Amy can smell the alcohol on the woman's lips. This sudden knowledge of hypocrisy prefaces Amy's decision to pour the gin down the sink.

The two times when Amy pours the gin down the sink are moments when we only see little more than the outward actions of the little girl:

Her mother called down the stairs when Amy came in, to ask if Rosemary had returned. Amy didn't answer. She went to the bar, took an open gin bottle, and emptied it into the pantry sink. She was nearly crying when she encountered her mother in the living room, and told her that her father was taking the cook [Rosemary, intoxicated] back to the station. (92)

Amy went upstairs to her room. In a glass on her table were the Japanese flowers that Rosemary had brought her, blooming staley in the water that was colored pink from the dyes. Amy went down the back stairs and through the kitsch into the dining room. Her father's cocktail things were spread over the bar. She emptied the gin bottle into the pantry sink and then put it back where she had found it. It was too late to ride her bicycle and too early to go to bed, and she knew if she got anything interesting on the television, like a murder, Mrs. Henlein would make her turn it off. (99)

The reader sees some introspection after Amy dumps the gin, but on the whole there is little description of the thoughts behind the act. In fact, Amy herself forgets about emptying the gin until the next day, when she is playing at her piano:

"In the middle of "Reflects d'Automne" it struck her that she was the one who had emptied the gin bottle [author's italics] (95)."

This lack of self-consciousness makes Amy very impressionable. She is aware of many of the inconsistencies in her parents' lives, but she also is naive enough to be influenced by them without her knowing it. Thus, the example they unwittingly set for her often causes her to act in ways that impinge on their lives. After Mr. Lawton discovers the missing gin, for example, he accuses the hired-help of stealing his liquor. Amy remains silent during these times, assuming the same kind of purposeful ignorance her parents and their friends engage in during their cocktail parties, when they ignore each other's drunkenness. In another scene, when some neighbors are at the Lawton's for a party, Amy answers Mrs. Bearden's question about school by saying: "I like it...I like private schools much better than public schools. It isn't so much like a factory (86)." One questions whether a young girl like Amy would think to compare a public school to a factory unless she has heard her parents making such a connection.

However, Amy is not simply a tabula rasa. She has her own opinions. For example, the girl ponders the way her parents perform when they are drunk, noticing that they do not get too rowdy when they are intoxicated. She notes that in many ways, their refusal to acknowledge their drunkenness is a sign of an excess of formality. If she wants anything, Amy wishes her parents would act sillier when they were drunk. If this were the case, she thinks, alcohol would at

least be more fun. In Amy's mind, alcohol should be an escape from Shady Hill society, not an entrance into it:

> Her parents never achieved the kind of rolling, swinging gate that she saw impersonated by a tightrope walker in the circus each year while the band struck up "Show Me the Way to Go Home" and that she like to imitate herself sometimes. She liked to turn round and round on the lawn, until, staggering and a little sick, she would whoop, "I'm drunk! I'm a drunken man!" and reel over in the grass, righting herself as she was about to fall and finding herself not unhappy at having lost for a second her ability to see the world. She had never seen them hanging on to a lamppost and singing and reeling but she had seen them fall down. They were never indecorous--they seemed to get more decorous and formal the more they drank...(96-7)

The name of the song Amy thinks of is of course a telling example of the mind-set of the little girl. Amy lives in a child's realm of fantasy that places her outside her parent's world. The story opens with her reading Black Beauty, a story about a exotic, faraway land, for example, and she bases her conception of alcohol on a circus performance that is totally unlike the way her parents act when drinking. Her decision to run away from Shady Hill reflects her desire to find a place that conforms to her simple vision of the world, and it reflects the guilt she feels from stirring up trouble in a place where she feels she doesn't belong. That pouring the gin down the drain was done with the best intentions in mind, yet was nevertheless discordant with the rules of the adults, highlights her alienation. Amy decides to leave a place she doesn't feel a part of. The argument between Mr. Lawton and Mrs. Henlein spurs Amy to run away, fearing "the collapse, in the middle of the night, of her father's [not her] house (101)."

The alienation spurring this decision is emphasized by Amy's impulse to go back to the city. Cheever here inverts the pastoral myth. Normally, a character

in the pastoral tradition would see the city as a place of disharmony, whereas Amy ironically sees just the opposite. However, the ultimate reason why Amy wants to get out of the suburbs is the same reason why someone would want to get into them, to escape the kind of corruption that caused Rosemary to return from the city drunk. Furthermore, Amy figures she can stay either with old friends or in a museum once she arrives in New York (103). Choosing both places shows a desire to return to a simpler environment, where one can fit into a place surrounded by others like oneself, and where things are seen nostalgically; in a museum, the value of the present is defined by the past.

When Mr. Lawton comes to stop Amy from leaving Shady Hill, he has a moment of reflection. For the first time do we see inside an adult's head in the story:

> Oh, why should she want to run away? Travel--and who knew better than a man who spent three days of every fortnight on the road--was a world of overheated plane cabins and repetitious magazines, where even the coffee, even the champagne, tasted of plastics. How could he teach her that home sweet home was the best place of all? (104)

Mr. Lawton is essentially saying that he wants to tell his daughter that outside of Shady Hill there are no solutions to her problems at home, that travel only deracinates a person. The articles that he associates with traveling, examples of kitsch culture, such as repetitious magazines, and coffee and champagne tasting of plastics, are examples of the counterfeit nature one experiences away from Shady Hill. For Mr. Lawton, home radiates real life. Amy sees these examples of kitsch in a positive light, however--Black Beauty, circus shows and television

murders are the kinds of things that amuse the little girl. They are easy to understand because, as kitsch, they are uncomplicated and easily digestible forms of the other worlds of the 'carnival', as opposed to something like gin, which has unpredictable, complex effects. This difference in viewpoints puts Amy and her father on a very different planes, a difference that is exacerbated by the contradictory signals Amy's ersatz parents, and the maids and cooks, like Rosemary, send her.

Mr. Lawton's ignorance of his daughter's involvement with the missing gin, and of how disconnected his daughter feels from her own home, underlies the complexity of the schism between Amy and her father. This ignorance is a consequence of the roles the father and daughter are constantly playing. Amy knows, and is disgusted by, the charade her parents play. Similarly, her father's reaction to seeing her at the station seems to infer that he does not comprehend the true, inner character of his daughter. He misreads her when he sees her at the station, thinking she is dependent on him, rather than independent from him at that moment:

> It was dark by the time Mr. Lawton got down to the station. He saw his daughter through the station window. The girl sitting on the bench, the rich names on her paper suitcase, touched him as it was in her power to touch him only when she seemed helpless or when she was very sick. (104)

To Mr. Lawton, Amy's flight is a sign of a sickness, a sign of her misdirection that he must correct. To Amy, it is a flight from sickness, an escape from the place where the complex world of drunken adults and drunken cooks.

And one does not get the impression that either the daughter or father is going to enunciate these conflicting arguments to each other.

When Mr. Lawton is at the station, we catch a glimpse of his side in this dynamic. He has an experience there that leads us to believe there is another side to the jovial drinker. We know that he is acquainted with the hollow world of traveling. It seems as if he has some opinions about the daily life of Shady Hill as well. Cheever describes his moment of reflection at the station, before he considers how he will convince Amy that home is the best place for her:

> He shivered with longing, he felt his skin coarsen as when, driving home late and alone, a shower of leaves on the wind crossed the beam of his headlights, liberating him for a second at the most from the literal symbols of his life--the buttonless shirts, the vouchers and bank statements, the order blanks, and the empty glasses. He seemed to listen--God knows for what. Commands, drums, the crackle of signal fires, the music of the glockenspiel--how sweet it sounds on the Alpine air--singing from a tavern in the pass, the honking of wild swans; he seemed to smell the salt air in the churches of Venice. Then, as it was with the leaves, the power of her [Amy's] figure to trouble him vanished. He was himself. (104)

It seems that occasionally Mr. Lawton feels dislocated, too. When he is alone, and leaves pass by his car, he has a feeling that there must be more to life than the buttonless shirts and bank statements that he deals with from day to day. The pastoral sensations that follow this feeling of dread are a sign of that alternate life. However, Mr. Lawton chooses not to dwell on these sensations. He returns to earth and is above the sentimentality of swooning over his daughter. This down-to-earth reaction to fantasy is what he seeks to impart to Amy. The times when Mr. Lawton feels his skin coarsen are analogous to Amy's feelings of confusion when her parents are performing under the influence of gin. Just as

pastoral sensations counteract her father's fear of the finitude of the literal implements of his day to day existence, so is Amy's flight from Shady Hill her childish enactment of these whims for another world. What Amy's father wants to teach her is to resist those whims, so that she may understand the way real life operates.

The catch-22 of this dynamic, however, is that Amy's parents seem to be able to understand real life only through the hazy lenses of gin. Which vision is clearer, the child's, or the parent's, is up for the reader to decide.

"Just Tell Me Who It Was:" Wives and What Could Be

The Shady Hill depicted in "Just Tell Me Who It Was" is such a nice place, so sweet a place, that it's cloying. Characters in the tale are so excessively affectionate, they are always on the brink of smothering each other and blinding themselves with love. The story is about their reactions to those moments when their excessive affection threatens to overturn the precariously pleasant life they have built up around themselves.

The points of concern in the story are the initial descriptions of Will Pym, the few scenes after the country club party, and the moment when Will lashes out at Henry Bulstrode on the train platform.

Will is a euphoric person. He is so intensely happy to have a nice house, a family, and all the other trappings that come with suburbia, we can safely say that he is almost completely satisfied with his life. Cheever paints a picture of Will that connotes this vitality:

> He was a cheerful, heavy man with a round face that looked exactly like a pudding. Everyone was glad to see him, as one is glad to see, at the end of a meal, the appearance of a bland, fragrant, and nourishing dish made of fresh eggs, nutmeg, and country cream. (138)

However, the reader should question the nature of Will's perfect world. As the above passage implies, there is something excessive about Will. He is

undoubtedly healthy, but perhaps too much so. His face doesn't just resemble a pudding, it looks "exactly" like a pudding; his appearance, equated with a large dessert, which comes at the end of a meal, is described in terms of excess, for a dessert tops off any food already consumed. Will is "heavy."

These questions are addressed more fully when Cheever begins describing Will's adoration for his wife. Will's heaviness translates into oppression in the realm of marriage:

> At dinners, he would look across the table at her in the candlelight--laughing, talking deeply, and flashing the rings he had bought her--and sigh deeply. He was always impatient for the party to end, so that they would be alone again, in a taxi or in an empty street where he could kiss her. When Maria first got pregnant, he couldn't describe his happiness. Every development in her condition astonished him. He was captivated by the preparations she made for the baby. When their first child was born, when milk flowed from her breasts, when their daughter excited in her the most natural tenderness, he was amazed. (139)

By identifying Maria in connection with the things he has given her, the rings and the baby, for example, and by wanting always to spirit her off so that he can give her more things, like kisses, Will seeks to control Maria through kindness. However, Will's amazement at Maria and his child shows us that his possessive love is more than simple domination. Judging by Cheever's earlier description of Will in terms of country cream and other 'nourishment,' we can say that Will's fascination with Maria's pregnancy, her 'nourishing' milk, and her natural tenderness is an extension of his fascination with himself and his material success. Will is so pleased with his ascendancy into Shady Hill, everything he sees is touched by his self-absorption. Cheever's comparison of Will's face to a

pudding takes on new meaning here. Will is plush and heavy physically, and psychologically his perspective is similarly enveloping. He is magnanimous to a fault, to the point that his liberality overwhelms his wife with passion.

An example of this overpowering love occurs when the couple are walking in the park. Will enthusiastically carves the pair's initials into a tree. Maria is less than excited:

> Will stopped and took a knife from his pocket and began to cut their initials in the bark of a tree. What sense would there be pointing out that his hair was thin? He meant to express love. It was Maria's youth and beauty that had informed his senses and left his mind so open that the earth seemed spread out before his eyes like a broad map of reason and sensuality...But Maria was cold and tired and hungry...When they got home, she would have to fix the supper. (141-2)

The couple's differences come to a head in the few days surrounding the annual Apple Blossom Fete, a costume ball. A week before the ball, Maria is tying paper apple blossoms to branches as part of her duties as a member of the decorations committee. Will is sitting in his bathrobe, the children are upstairs sleeping, and all seems right in the world. Then Maria models her costume for Will:

> She was wearing gold slippers, pink tights, and a light velvet bodice, cut low enough to see the division of her breasts...A terrible sadness came over Will. The tight costume--he had to polish his eyeglasses to see it better--displayed all the beauty he worshipped, and it also expressed her perfect innocence of the wickedness of the world. (143)

Will protests that Maria cannot wear such a flattering and revealing outfit, but she pleads and begs he allow her to. Will cannot resist her entreaties:

"You're lovely and innocent," he said. "You don't know what a bunch of dogs men are."
"I don't want to be lovely and innocent all the time."
"Oh, Mummy [Maria], you don't mean that! You can't mean that! You don't know what your saying!"
"I only want to have a good time..."
"All right, Mummy, all right," he said. (144-5)

Here Cheever preaches a lesson about the advantages of moderation. Will is so consumed with his vision of innocence and beauty, he cannot believe that Maria has the urges of a normal individual. Will's infatuation has set him up for a fall. His vision of Maria was wonderful, but unrealistic, and now, when the fete is approaching, he cannot react to her in any sensible manner. His adoration has been equivalent to idolatry, and, in an inversion of the Pygmalion myth, his statue has become real, but has turned into exactly what he feared most. If he had not been so excessive in his adoration, Maria asserting herself would not have been such a blow to him.

The fete is just the beginning of the unraveling of Will's elation, however. Maria returns from the ball early in the morning, long after Will has gone to bed. The fete was the equivalent of Mikhail Bakhtin's 'carnival,' a celebration in which the mores of the dominant strata of a social hierarchy are questioned and subverted. In whooping it up all night long, Maria has similarly undermined Will's hegemony. She realizes that by staying up all night she has shattered the image Will has always had of her:

She had lost her pocketbook. Her tights had been torn by the scales of a dragon. The smell of spilled wine came from her clothes. The sweetness of the air and the fineness of the light touched her. The party seemed like gibberish. She had had all the partners she wanted, but she had not had all the right ones. The hundreds of apple blossoms that she had tied to branches and that had looked, at a distance, so like real blossoms would soon be swept into the ash can.

The trees of Shady Hill were filled with birds--larks, thrushes, robins, crows--and now the air began to ring with their song. The pristine light and the loud singing reminded her of some ideal--some simple way of life, in which she dried her hands on an apron and Will came home from the sea--that she had betrayed. (148)

After this episode, Will begins to question Maria's fidelity. We never really know whether Maria has committed adultery or not, but this is irrelevant, for Will himself is not truly concerned with facts. The tribulations he goes through before resolving his crisis are a series of self-deceptions designed to mend the shattered illusions that previously constituted his view of life.

Looking over his marriage with a suspcious eye, Will recounts a number of episodes from the past, each one raising questions about Maria's behavior that hitherto had not been asked. Times when she came home late from the city, or when he thought he saw her walking arm-in-arm with another man--these moments feed his paranoia. At a gathering held the day after the fete, he discovers that a pair of gold slippers and a blue lace girdle were found on the floor of the country club hall. He confronts Maria over the lost garments, but she has no idea of what he is talking about. He rifles through her closet in hopes of finding prove of either her guilt or innocence:

He went upstairs to their room, which was dark. He turned on a light in her closet and opened the chest where she kept her shoes. There were a great many pairs, and among them were gold shoes, silver shoes, bronze shoes, and he was shuffling through the collection when he saw Maria standing in the doorway. "Oh, my God, Mummy, forgive me!" he said. "Forgive me!"
"Oh, Willy!" she exclaimed. "Look what you've done to my shoes." (157-8)

The miscommunication between the two at this point is clear. Will's world has been shaken, while Maria simply sees the problem in terms of a pile of disordered shoes. The inference in this passage is that Maria has not drastically changed in her affection for Will, while her husband's internal conception of the world has gone through a complete metamorphosis. She has easily recuperated from the 'carnival,' whereas Will, who has always placed all his eggs in one basket, that of the role of lead actor in his marriage, cannot so easily put his world back together now that he questions the idyllic basis on which his marriage depended. As a result, he is cut off from himself, from the faith in his wife around which his life revolved, and thus he cannot reflect on what he is doing. It is only when he remembers his adoration for his wife, and then feels guilt for questioning her innocence, that he is able to comprehend his own actions.

However, since Will's vision of his wife has always been his own construct, to reassert it he must change his vision of himself. He reforms his identity when, for a variety of specious reasons, he decides that Henry Bulstrode is his wife's lover, and makes his move at the train station:

And then Henry Bulstrode stepped out of the waiting room, showed his white teeth with a smile, and frowned at his newspaper. Without any warning at all, Will walked over to him and knocked him down. Women screamed, and the scuffle that followed was very confusing. (162)

After this brief moment, Will is back to normal. Suddenly he is the master of his world again:

> Now his fruitful life with Maria would be resumed. They would walk on Sunday afternoons again, and play word games by the open fire again, and weed the roses again, and love one another under the sounds of the rain again, and hear singing of the crows; and he would buy her a present that afternoon as a signal of love and forgiveness. He would buy her pearls or gold or sapphires--something expensive; emeralds maybe; something no young man could afford. (162)

The story ends as it began. Will's adoration is signified by him giving Maria, the gem of his life, precious stones, which will adorn her, yet be indications of his place at the head of the table. His role in Shady Hill has been reaffirmed, at least in his own mind, and Maria still will not know the intensity of his feelings, or the lengths he has gone to love her so deeply, and wrongly.

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