

On Neddy Merrill's Crisis of Masculinity in *The Swimmer*

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Received 8 June 2021; accepted 15 July 2021
Published online 26 August 2021

Abstract

The Swimmer is one of John Cheever's best known stories. It presents the classic theme of quest and journey. This paper focuses on the protagonist Neddy's swimming journey, probes into his intense longing for masculinity, scrutinizes the nature and causes of his masculinity crisis relating to the postwar conceptions of class, gender and patriarchy norms combined with structural economic changes and the increasing autonomy of women, and reveals Cheever's deep concern about white middle class male's dilemma so as to offer some inspiration for resolving modern spiritual crisis.

Key words: John Cheever; *The Swimmer*; Masculinity; Crisis

Bai, C. Y. (2021). On Neddy Merrill's Crisis of Masculinity in *The Swimmer*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 23(1), 5-12. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/12232>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/12232>

INTRODUCTION

John Cheever (1912-1982) is American novelist who is best known for his short stories of middle class suburbanites. *The Swimmer* (1964) is one of his most anthologized and discussed stories. It depicts Neddy's eight-mile homeward swimming journey, which is highly symbolic, indicating the "age old themes of quest, journey, initiation and discovery" (Auser, 1967, p.18). Why does the protagonist Neddy make a hasty decision to swim home by traversing a string of pools in the conventional middle-class party? What does he quest for? These issues

attract critics' attention. Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet (1984, 1989, 1992) hold that Neddy sets off on perilous knightly quest for Holy Grail, or the fabled fountain of youth, or even salvation. These analyses are helpful for our deeper understanding of the framework of the story, but they obscure the specific relationship between Neddy and his surroundings or time backgrounds, thus the meaning and import of the quest awaits illumination. This short story is set in the post war affluent American suburbia. Neddy Merrill, a white middle-class man who appears to have fulfilled the American Dream: the happy nuclear family, the large suburban house and a decent career. However, as the homeward journey proceeds, the reality of his failure is revealed gradually. In fact, he has been bankrupted and expelled from middle class. His family has got into trouble. The story exposes the economic dilemma of white middle-class man and reflects his sense of insecurity and imprisonment, meanwhile, it sheds light on his aspiration for new strong norms, order and value. In considering the historic context of post WWII, the author of this paper tends to believe that Neddy starts his epic swimming journey in quest for reclaiming his hegemonic masculinity so as to strengthen his middle class male identity.

According to Michael Kimmel (2005), the quest for masculinity is one of the main motifs of American culture. Since the mid-19th century, the social and cultural shifts brought by the development of industry and technology has elevated women to a higher position. The American culture turns to be feminized, which left modern man ever more vulnerable and consumed by anxiety and fear. Therefore, the quest for masculinity constitutes a strategy to get away from feminization. And the frontiers, mountains, forests, sea, and battlefields are the ideal settings for the construction or reconstruction of masculinities. So Neddy chooses the uncommon path of swimming pools to demonstrate his quest for masculinity.

Masculinity, or the so-called dominant masculine stereotype, the manly ideal is a complex amalgam of beliefs and practices. It connotes not only perfectibility of the male body, such as strength, energy, and athletic prowess (Martin, 2002), but also man's virtues such as self-discipline and restraint, being able to concentrate its energies, surmount obstacles and restrict emotional weakness (Mosse, 1996). The aim of those disciplined exertions is to make "chaste, pure, capable, fearless, truthful and ready to bear arms" ones out of men (Mosse, 1996, p.43). Faludi (1999) goes further to strengthen that the foundation for masculinity lies in men's ability to overcome feminine vulnerability internally and tame the natural world through productive labor externally, that is, to wrest something out of the raw materials of the physical world. It seems to be concordant with the 19th century civic ideology of producerism which believes male producer are capable to tame raw sensuous feminine nature, to assert masculine will over feminine seductive nature, to master his inner nature to transcend his cultural and historical particularity, so as to fulfill as the authors of their own fate and even the determiners of the universal or common good. (Lasch, 1991) In accordance with the traditional masculine beliefs, President John F. Kennedy (1917-1963) displayed an image of youth, vigor, toughness and moral courage, through which he framed his presidential campaign and his programs while in office by emphasizing maturity, sexual containment within marriage, and men's role of breadwinners. Kennedy himself was closely identified with the Green Berets, the American supermen with hard bodies and tough minds. To him, the ideal of masculinity was an aeon of physical, mental, spiritual striving, connoting both heroic deeds in the public sphere and masculine privilege in the private sphere. (Dean, 1998)

"Masculine identities are lived in the flesh, but fashioned in the imagination." (Dawson, 1991, p.118) Kennedy's effort of linking political programs to American male virtues contributed a lot to form the imagination of masculinities such as physical strength, force of will, adventurous bravery, and technical competence. But this imagination of masculinity actually indicated or even revealed anxieties and crisis of post-war masculinity. The historian and critic Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (1958) declared that post-war period was suffering from absence of maleness. He believed that something has gone badly wrong with the American conscious of masculinity. Furthermore, Schlesinger's concern was shared by many other commentators on postwar culture. Kaja Silverman (1992) and Sally Robinson (2000) asserted the white masculine decline in postwar America. Alice Ferrebe (2005) argued that masculinity fail to pay the traditional dividends in the postwar era in which men were anxious over its waning influence. In the postwar period, industrialization and the changing nature of work

not only made steady increase in the number of women in the workforce, elevating women to a position of power, but also smashed the once-autonomous male self. The relevant social and cultural shifts posed profound threat to the average heterosexual white male. They had become victims of a smothering, overpowering, suspiciously collectivist mass society. Their public and private lives were undergoing fundamental change and their sense of traditional masculinity became blurred.

In such a historical context, how do American men demonstrate traditional manly virtues? In *The Swimmer*, Neddy, as the representative of white middle class man in 1960s, makes his own attempt in answering this question. He quests in the swimming journey stretching from one end of his world to the other, considering himself as a pilgrim, an explorer, a man with a destiny. Undergoing dramatic changes of nature and climate, he returns not to the triumph or victory of a welcoming home but, rather, to a deserted house with the revelation that he has been expelled from the affluent community, from the social class that go with it. The story not only provides a deliberate exposure of the dis-empowering and failure of Neddy, but also reveals a growing crisis about the white middle class male as a group. This paper tends to limn the ways how Neddy quests for reclaiming masculinity, scrutinize the nature and causes of his masculinity crisis relating to the postwar conceptions of class, gender and patriarchy norms, and reveal Cheever's deep concern about white middle class dilemma.

1. NEDDY'S QUEST FOR MASCULINITY

The story begins with a party on a midsummer Sunday when the affluent suburbanites are shaking off the effects of the previous night's drinking. Neddy Merrill makes his first appearance as a slender man, who might have been compared to a summer's day and have the especial slenderness of youth, though he is far from young. When he equips with a tennis racket or a sail bag his impression will be definitely of youth and sport. Being proud of his youthful appearance and exuberance, Neddy considers himself as legendary and decides to do something devotional to celebrate and enlarge the beauty of the day and his own youthfulness: swimming cross the county, via his friends' pools, to his own house. From the very beginning, Cheever spares no effort to strengthen Neddy's youthful figure which is the representative of masculine character. It is not only the obvious appeal to women, but also the standard of male identification. According to Forth (2008), the male body exerts a direct and normal connection with masculinity. Since the 20th century, with the development of modernism and subversion of Logos-centrism, the male body has been the intimate connection with the world, and the ultimate method of identification. (Kimmel, 1994) Kennedy identified his own body with

the state, identified the stamina and strength with the prosperity of nations and empires. But the stamina and strength was only guaranteed by participation in sports and interest in physical activity, therefore, he deployed scenarios for the ritual enactment of physical ordeals as tests of manhood as well as mobilizing the male bodies. (Dean, 1998) Similarly, Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919) also attached importance to sports and regarded baseball as the true sports for a manly race out of the concern about American masculinity and the future of the nation. With the expanding postwar prosperity, sports became a part of daily life, and the activities like swimming, golf, hiking and tennis were well-accepted. Neddy, as a middle-aged suburbanite in postwar period, must have spent much time and energy in sports so as to keep such slender figure. His physical greatness lies in the fact that he always dove into the pools which apparently helps to assure himself of the traditional masculine virtues as aggressiveness, daring, determination, and strength.

With the athletic figure, Neddy proceeds as an explorer and adventurer. Being compared to the Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de Leon who searched for the fabled fountain of youth and trekked southwesterly across Florida, Neddy also chooses to move in the direction of southwest. He charts his path by memory and imagination: the string of pools, the quasi-subterranean stream that curved across the country, most of the pools belonging to people he knows. He names it Lucinda after his wife. Throughout his exploring progress, Neddy shuns people to avoid getting caught in any conversations and delaying his voyage. When he weathers a storm, he tries to identify the cloud formation. When he finds a dry pool he feels like an explorer who seeks a torrential headwater and finds a dead stream. In relevant with Juan Ponce de Leon's searching for fountain of youth, Neddy's quest is also paralleled with the attempt of Grail heroes. (Blythe & Sweet, 1992) Their tales start when the Fisher King is ailing, and his kingdom thereupon becomes sterile, his people suffering. Neither the king nor the land can be cured without a pure quest for Holy Grail. Only when the Grail heroes have gone through all kinds of hardships and obtained the Holy Grail can they enable the Fisher King to regain youth and make the land go back to fertility. (Weston, 1957) Neddy's world is certainly such a waste land devoid of spiritual meaning and filled with materialism. Everybody from the priest to followers drink too much on Sunday parties. Sunday is usually regarded as the time of worship, but the suburbanites indulge in endless parties and drinking. The cup they are holding is originally the Grail symbol, but it appears ironically here as for selfish enjoyment. Through which, Cheever's criticizing of suburbanites' stray from the original values becomes obvious. Neddy handles with the hospitable customs of these neighbors in a diplomatic way treating them as inhabitants of newly discovered lands, that is, the other. He is unwilling to have his quest interrupted.

Actually, Neddy is one typical representative of these suburbanites. He is married, settles in a big house eight miles away, where his four beautiful daughters might be playing tennis. With the staple items of the 1960s, he enjoys his happy suburban middle class life. Moreover, he appeals to other woman except for his wife. His extramarital affair with Shirley Adams lasts, and he deploys it as the supreme elixir and the pain killer, compares it to a brightly colored pill which can put the spring back into his step and the joy in his heart. To him, the body of woman is a colony which contributes to demonstrate his masculinity and construct his identity. Studies showed that infidelity was prevalent at that time, and more than half of Americans' sexual activity took place out of marriage. (Reumann, 2005) With the developing urbanization and the burgeoning suburbs, community surveillance of marriages lessened. A declaration was issued in 1955 that it was inappropriate for the Government to control over marriage. (Langum, 1994) Thus, the state played declining role in punishing violations of marital vows and fomented marriage unrest indirectly.

In America, the widely recognized standard for male privilege is: "young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports." (Goffman, 1963, p.128) Any man who fails to meet the standard is likely to regard himself as inferior. (Goffman, 1963) Neddy seems to have met the standard, but he is still in quest. The more he strengthens his quest for youth and male privilege, the greater his fear of losing it becomes. Actually, his intense quest itself implies crisis.

2. NEDDY'S CRISIS OF MASCULINITY

In order to reclaim masculinity, Neddy starts this swimming adventure. When he delights in the natural beauty and affluence of the suburbia, he hears the thunder with an approaching storm, indicating his getting into the unknown space. When he reaches the Levy's which is the seventh pool of his quest, he finds that the family is absent, though the word Levy in Hebrew connotes joining. As the adventure progresses, while crossing different thresholds, he experiences various trials and tribulations of a hero in quest. As he gets to the Welcher's, he turns to be disappointed and bewildered to find it dry since no one ever drained his pool when he went away for holiday. Obviously, this breach in the chain of water has broken the coherence of his mythic journey. Water is often associated with source of life and healing, and Welcher's dry pool implies he starts experiencing sterility and lifelessness. Meanwhile, this pool without water fails to oblige Neddy with the sense of Narcissus for his egoistical swimming. As he tries to cross the highway,

Route 424, several drivers laugh at him, jeer at him and throw cans at him, treating him as a fool. He begins to doubt his quest and thinks of giving up. But he realizes he cannot quit as he has gone too far. Ultimately, he manages to get across with the aid from an old man who slows down at fifteen miles per hour. Symbolically enough, the speed limit of the old man, the number fifteen echoes the number of pools of Lucinda river, and it alludes to Dante's *Inferno* in which the poet is aided by an old guardian. Till then, the prospect of Neddy's quest is alarming. Furthermore, the quick change of season from midsummer to autumn reminds Neddy of his wound. His growing wanting of a drink indicates that his awareness of reality is growing too, accordingly, his anxiety of lost is growing too, thus, his adventurous quest appears not promising. In the Halloran's, he gets condolence and sympathy about his misfortune of losing his job and family. Then he gets shocked again to notice his friend Eric Sachs who has lost his navel due to illness. Naval is considered to be a link to birth, and the absence of naval foreshadows the disconnection from the ancestors and marks a inter-generational discontinuity. It can be understood as another breach in his adventurous quest. In order to restore himself and make the quest go on, Neddy gatecrashes at the Biswanger's. Though he gets a drink successfully, though he manages to swim quickly in their pool and leave immediately, he realizes he has transformed into the foreigner, the exile and the outsider there. Grace Biswanger discloses his bankruptcy without mercy. He expects to get consoled by his mistress Shirley Admas in the next pool but he is greeted with humiliation. Shirley Adams not only criticizes his immaturity but also rejects any further assistance either with money or a drink. When he turns to leave, he notices the figure of another young man. Undoubtedly, he has been replaced, as the supreme elixir too has left him alone and the cycle of life continues without him. When he finally emerges from the last pool and manages to stand at the front door of his own house, he gets miserable and exhausted. The locks on the doors are rusty. The house is dark and empty. It echoes the very beginning of this adventure, when Lucinda asks him where he is going to. Neddy tells her that he is going to swim back home and names the water path Lucinda proudly. Ironically enough, Lucinda is originated from the word Lucy which means light. Ultimately, Neddy fades into darkness, as he tries to follow the path of light. (Thakur, 2015)

Neddy's swimming journey is thought-provoking. The waters of the Lucinda River is symbolic of time's passage, and the season undergoes great change when he trespassing them. After the storm in the Levy's, he shivers in the peculiar sadness at the sign of autumn. Then, he smells autumnal fragrance with chrysanthemums or marigolds. He sees Andromeda, Cepheus, and Cassiopeia with which he tries to ascertain his position in the manner

of ancient mariners, but failed since the constellations are out of whack. He even notices the wintry gleam reflected on the water of the Biswangers' pool. Meanwhile, great changes occur to himself. He starts out vital and strong, enjoying the delight of swimming; he hurls himself into pools, hoists himself out, disdaining the ladder. He even despises men who did not hurl themselves into pools. However, by the tenth pool, his arms become lame. His legs feel rubbery and ache at the joints. Then he gasps, being close to drowning. By the thirteenth pool, he paddles, not swim, and gets out with the help of the ladder. At the last pool he has to rest and is stupefied with exhaustion. The changes of season and himself illuminate that his endeavors produce the opposite effect — he grows older, and his world turns to be desolate. He is brought into the depths of debility. What's more, Neddy has not been able to find the rejuvenating liquid, the fabled fountain of youth, or the Holy Grail. He has been rejected several times even for a drink. When he starts to reflect on himself at the sight of fallen leaves and cooler weather, he is stopped by the sound of tennis game which acts like the Siren song to clear away all his apprehensions and makes him ignore the overcast sky and the cold air. His confusion and unwillingness in facing the actualities of time's passage, his illusion of youthfulness, his confidence of adventure, make him appear increasingly pathetic and pitiful at the end of the journey. When he gets to the empty and dark house, the revelation has made itself clear: his quest has been futile, and it is doomed to failure. (Blythe & Sweet, 1989)

Not only Neddy, but also his neighbors have run into trouble. There are other houses in various states of abandonment or decline. The Levys' empty house shows no sign of life. The Lindley's riding ring is overgrown with grass and all the jumps are dismantled. They must have sold their horses or gone away for the summer since Neddy remembers having heard something about Lindley and their horses. (Cheever, 1978, p.730) Similarly, the Welchers' pool is dry. They have folded the furniture, covering it with a tarpaulin, locked the bathhouse, and shut the windows. Neddy recalls that he has got their invitation of dinner only a week or so ago. But now they have to put the house for sale. Another friend of Neddy, Eric Sachs, who has suffered from illness and has lost his navel, living in a ruined state. Obviously, they encounter a number of difficulties such as losing property, wealth and health, which reveals the general deterioration of suburbanites' economic and social status, indicating the dark side of American Dream questing. Though the middle class white men has struggled, but they are no longer able to control their own destinies.

The late 19th- and early 20th-century America saw a surge of masculine anxiety for bureaucratization, urbanization, commercialization, and social reform combined with the Great Depression and World Wars,

which undermined traditional sources of masculine identity and posed heavy burdens for American males. (Griswold, 1993) Due to the postwar boom, the middle class expanded, but the gender-role ideals narrowed, and male autonomy declined. White-collar work generated concerns about male physical fitness and vigor. (Berrett, 1997) Masculinity had long been identified with being a breadwinner. (Connell, 1995) Bringing home income sufficient to raise a family and keep wives away from the public sphere of work had been the major responsibility of male adult. As the American economy had shifted from industrial to service-oriented with high technology, men's real wages declined sharply, and they were no longer effective providers. (Tiger, 1999) Jobs which offer a breadwinner income became few, and they were no longer available for most men. (Connell, 1995) Moreover, many new jobs emphasized feminine skills such as creativity and teamwork instead of traditional masculinity traits, and workplace cultures were becoming feminized accordingly. (Hochschild, 1989) Postwar workers, whether in blue- or white-collar jobs, were more likely to work all of their lives for others than the older generations. Their vaunted American ideal of independent entrepreneurship gradually gave way to a pattern of laboring for expanding conglomerates. With the prevailing of consumerism, man, the producer, gradually objectified as an image that can be bought and sold, leading to the loss of a substantive sense of identity and purpose. Consequently, the ideal of masculinity had become devoid of significance. Instead of being the authors of their destiny, they became less self-reliant and entrepreneurial and turned to be passive receptacles of economic, consumption and cultural shifts. From this aspect, masculinity had been corrupted. (Faludi, 1999)

Inevitably, discussions of the problems faced by men lead to women. With the development of the women's movement, more women performed paid labor and produced a change in familial power relations. (Connell, 1995) Despite the postwar return to the domestic sphere, the number and percentage of working women increased steadily throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. (Reumann, 2005) As a result, many men had acquiesced in their wives' sharing of the economic responsibility and no longer persist that making enough money to keep the wife away from public sphere is essential for adult masculinity. Not only from the workplace, men have also been displaced from the family realm, which implying their loss of patriarchal power as well as economic privilege and further undermining their primary function of reproducing. (Tiger, 1999) Because of the easy access to birth control, women were in control of the biological reproduction. Thus, men have become alienated from both the economic and biological functions and responsibilities, and had to give up their power. (Tiger, 1999) Consequently, divorces increased wildly and constituted a unique feature of America. According to James Bossard (1957,1958), the

American divorce rate was seven times of Canadian, more than twice of Sweden, and even outnumbered the total of Canada, England, Wales, France, West Germany, Yugoslavia, Switzerland, and Japan. Meanwhile, the high divorce rate did not let matters rest there, the uneasy marriage increasingly provoked much concern. Studies showed that nearly one third of marriages were unhappy though remained intact. (Averill, 1963) Thereafter, extramarital sex became an outlet for this repression. About half of the married males had extramarital sexuality, and much of this adultery took place with married women rather than prostitutes. It was affirmed by the fact that 26 percent of the surveyed married women confessed to at least one extramarital affair by age forty. (Kinsey, 1948) Obviously, Neddy was not the only one to betray his spouse. In the Biswangers' party, participants tend to tell dirty stories to mixed companies after dinner. And they don't feel shameful about it. Although adultery was less likely to be considered as a matter of crime, the extramarital involvement was believed to weaken marital bonds and certainly result in decline of morality and social responsibility.

The marital discord is attributed to Americans' affluence and intense pressure on living. American culture strengthens too much the ideal of success, especially the material success. American men have been encouraged to assert themselves as masculine and successful heterosexual subjects. The great strain of "keeping up with the Joneses" drives husbands to find relaxation in a hectic pace. (Caprio, 1953, p.14) In such atmosphere, Neddy is inevitably worn out by the heavy demands of reality. From the fact that Neddy seeks comfort from his mistress and that his wife Lucinda pays little attention to Neddy's adventure, enjoying her by sunbathing, drinking and having parties, it is possible that their relationships are ruined. Whereas, his wife, Lucinda, being so popular in suburban social circle, cannot give up the comforts of middle class life, and probably has chosen to leave Neddy.

To conclude, the structural economic changes, the prevailing of consumerism combined with the increasing threat from women, both in workplace and in family realm, has driven American men into crisis. By presenting the failure of Neddy's quest, Cheever sheds light upon its irreversible decline, and expresses the dire need of new form of gender relations, which will benefit everyone, not only the male individuals but also their family members, communities, and even the nation as a whole.

3. THE AUTHOR CHEEVER'S CRISIS OF MASCULINITY

Cheever tends to set his stories primarily in the prosperous suburbs and shapes his characters as affluent men and women blessed with leisure and material comforts. The husband is usually middle-aged, wryly observant, with

a mortgage as well as other staple items of the mid-20th century, children, a dog, a television set, a swimming pool and a station wagon. The wife is more likely to be a housewife than holding a paid job. She spends her time entertaining, playing tennis, and worrying about her family. This is the paragon of American family. He depicts social realms such as country clubs, cocktail parties, church assemblies and expensive outdoor sports, which constitutes a world to which the mass of readers aspired. And this is also the ideal world Cheever himself aspired. Actually, fiction provides an indirect outlet for the author to express his own ideas rooted in his life experience and the corresponding historical background. John Cheever has experienced the same economic dilemma and marriage disarray, and aspired for the same achievement with Neddy. Growing up in time for the Depression, making a career in an increasingly unlikely occupation — writing short stories, with the starvation wages paid by the *The New Yorker* through the 1940s and 1950s, Cheever has struggled to get rid of the economic dilemma. When he finally found ways to attain what he dreamed, he felt he was trapped by his own endeavors: the rootless suburban life, the stifling marriage, the obligation of supporting family, the pressure of literary creation.

When Cheever first came to New York, he had to live in the slum, eat stale bread. He even couldn't afford to buy the meal for their first date with his future wife Mary. When he became the main contributor for *New Yorker*, his economic picture began to be brightening but still inadequate to support a family. He barely made ends meet with the financial aid from his father-in-law. He dreamed to live a middle class life. In early 1960s, before the publication of *The Swimmer*, he managed to buy his own house. It is located in Ossining, the suburb of New York, with swimming pool and lawn, symbolizing his realization of middle class dream. However, good times did not last long. Cheever spent money freely by sending his children to private schools, hiring domestic servants and private nurses, enjoying luxury. What was worse, he was bad at investment and planning. Soon, he cannot maintain such decent way of living and the financial pressure emerged again. He fell into heavy drinking intentionally or unintentionally. But he was proud of his ability to imbibe large quantities of hard drinking. To him, drinking was a manly indulgence, a confirmation of power, courage and masculinity. (Cheever, 1984)

Except for the economic dilemma, Cheever's uneasy family life contributed a lot to his masculinity crisis. Be born to a WASP family in Quincy, Massachusetts, Cheever developed a traditional patriarchal view on family. His father who had worked selling shoes for 50 years quit his business one day for an investment partnership. Unfortunately, he failed and drifted into hard-drinking uselessness since then. His mother had to run a gift shop so as to keep the family afloat and enabled it to hang on to its shabby respectability, thus made the

father feel humiliated and emasculated. (Cheever, 1984) The perversion of gender roles of his parents had brought catastrophe to Cheever. He showed deepest concern and sympathy with his weak father, whereas, he had been discontent with his dominant mother all his life. He even abominated all the gift shops. To him, those decorations and souvenirs with fragrance there polluted the air, darkened the blue sky, and breached the gender norms. (Cheever, 1984)

Inevitably, Cheever's discontent with his mother found its outlet in his own marriage with Marry. Their marriage lasted over 40 years, but it was full of quarrel, confrontation and infidelity. Cheever held complicated feelings towards his wife. On the one hand, he loved his wife and longed for warmth, affection and console on her part; on the other hand, his sense of inferiority, panic and anxiety hindered their intimacy. Cheever worried if he can afford to the material comfort to which Mary had been accustomed since childhood. He was even afraid that he could not fulfill his masculinity as his father failed. He often read his own works to Marry, and appreciated her comments. He was proud of Mary's beauty, wisdom and creation, but he sometimes felt he was despised by Marry. Marry confessed she didn't like his works, and she complained about her loss of freedom in marriage and Cheever's failure in supporting the family. (Donaldson, 1988) When she took up a teaching job in college in 1962, she began to go her own way. Her independence made Cheever prickly. Due to his vulnerabilities, Cheever began to seek comfort from other women. He became infatuated with Hollywood movie star Hope Lange in 1960s and has kept this extramarital relationship all his life. When he was in deep melancholia, he had to call the name of Hope Lange constantly so that he could get up because through which, he felt he still was loved and needed by somebody. He also fell in love with other women afterwards. They shared the characters of being beautiful and capable. From some extent, they were the substitutes of Mary. (Donaldson, 1988)

Cheever expresses his the aspiration for family affection and traditional patriarchal order through literary creation. He shaped many traditional women characters, such as Ethel in *The Season of Divorce* (1950), Cora in *The Ocean* (1964), and Louise in *O Youth and Beauty* (1953). All of them are family-oriented. Meanwhile, Cheever also paid literary attention to the modern women. Jill in *An Educated American Woman* is the typical example. She graduates from prestigious university, and is obsessed with all kinds of activities: helping to organize private school, holding the presidency of every civic organization in the community, running the local travel agency, writing critical biography of Gustave Flaubert which attracts great attention from the New York publisher, running for town supervisor on the Democratic ticket and successfully gets the largest Democratic plurality in the history of the village, and so

on. Nevertheless, she tries to spare time to do housework. Due to envy and humiliation, her husband feels discontent with the family life. Ultimately, he falls for another woman who is inferior to Jill, turning to be consoled at once. (Cheever, 1978) Obviously, Jill is shaped in the prototype of Cheever's wife. When Marry went out to work, Cheever felt his hope had gone with her. It seems that woman's wit and capability constitutes catastrophe to a family. Undoubtedly, holding on this outdated view, Cheever's exploration of women space and ideal images of wife and mother in his short stories has been limited.

Besides, Cheever's male characters in short stories constitute perfect metaphorical expression for his own anxiety of masculinity. Like Neddy, many of them endeavor to obtain wealth, love, excitement, or renewed youth, especially those in midlife crisis strive to reclaim masculinity. In *O Youth and Beauty* (1953), Cash is an old track star. He never gets tiresome about his brilliant past. He is careful about his weight, walking to the train in the morning so as to keep his slender figure and mark his previous honour of athlete. He has been one of the best-liked men in the community. But he suffers reverses and disappointments in business, which results in many money worries. To redefine himself against the contours of shallow values and low spirits, Cash begins to run the hurdle race in parties, in a similar way with Neddy's cross county swim. The running over the sofa, tables, chairs and fire screens makes him fulfilled. When he practised at home one day, he was shot to death accidentally by his wife whom he asked to fire the starting gun despite the fact that she had never fired it before. In *The Country Husband* (1954), Francis once was a brave soldier who had taken part in the battles in Europe during the WWII. Now he no longer attracts any attention from the people around, and even when he has just survived in an air crash, he fails to get any console from his family. Then he fell for the teenaged babysitter whom he thought can understand him. But he finds that he had no ability to protect his love. Finally, he has to resort to woodworking, being immersed in earthly Glory when he was young. In *The Ocean* (1964), the common middle-aged Charlie likes to be praised as energetic and masculine though he looks like hell with gray face and falling out hair. (Cheever, 1978) Thus, self-deception, decay, and darkness are as much a threat to his male characters as they are to Cheever himself.

In the suburbia, the husbands struggle to preserve the illusion of keeping female in the domestic sphere while male working. But the wives transgress their natural roles and become more active to seek their own ideals after half a century's endeavors. The lack of communication and understanding exacerbate family problems and make the crisis of marriage inevitable. Accordingly, they degenerate into infidelity, adultery, seduction, homosexuality and alcoholism to pacify themselves internally since they

cannot physically remove themselves from the domestic troubles. Being obsessed with subjects of quest and disillusionment, triumph and failure, joy and pain, pleasure and shame, Cheever knows traditional aggressive masculinity may not be equal to happiness or contentment in the new era, but he persists, from his short stories and his life, that many men, especially he himself, could not be happy without it. His emphatic depiction of Neddy's youthfulness and quest for reclaiming masculinity actually reflects his anxiety about emasculation. It can be regarded as his instinctive response to the male crisis in the mid-20th century.

4. CONCLUSION

Neddy's tragedy mirrored the social reality of mid-20th century which witnessed a re-inscription, re-invention and expectation of rigid, conventional gender roles. Through Neddy's exploration in *The Swimmer*, Cheever presents the paragon nuclear family and the ideal image of the white middle-class man as father, breadwinner and benign patriarch, and then proceeds to expose this entire "ideal" as dystopic, destructive and repressive. *The Swimmer* was published in 1964, when Cheever has just begun his appreciation of material comforts as middle class. That is, Cheever immediately sensed the danger of the luxury atmosphere and spiritual emptiness of middle class life when he attained it. He showed deep humanistic concern about the dilemma of middle class white by implying that they are deeply hurt as well as benefit from aggressive masculinity and patriarchy order. In his later works, he made strenuous effort continuously in exploring how to re-find dignity, rebuild social order and reconstruct masculinity. Accordingly, the new diversified gender norms combined with humanity and equality would be more positive and deserve our further exploration.

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