

The lost years of Neddy Merrill in John Cheever's 'The Swimmer'

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Angol érettségi tétel

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Neddy
Merrill in John Cheever's 'The Swimmer';

The
Swimmer by John Cheever is built
around a strange cycle, in which the decisive years in the life of an
individual are condensed into the happenings of a few hours. Neddy
Merrill's
ridiculous, senseless adventure is a satire of the superficial
lifestyle that
is characteristic of the milieu he represents. It is a world where
nothing is
what it seems and the heaven-like summer in the beginning evaporates by
the end
of the story just as if it had never existed.

When we first
see Neddy Merrill at the Westerhazy's swimming-pool, he
emerges just as if he
had stepped out from some TV advertisement. He decides on
'discovering the
Lucinda river', because he is bored with this perfect dream
world. He has
basically nothing better to do than entertain himself with adventures
he
creates for himself in order to make his far too relaxed and convenient
life a
bit more exciting. It doesn't seem to be such a crazy idea
after all. Neddy is
really someone who can afford to make a fool of himself, since the
neighbors
would certainly think what a lovely fool he is, the fun boy of elite
suburbia.
He is rich and sexy, whatever he does, it can't do any harm
to his reputation.
As long as he remains rich, of course.

The adventure
starts off promisingly, the Grahams, the Hammers the Lears and the
others are
all amused and pleased by the fact that Neddy, this lovely guy decided
to make
his way swimming through their pool, and at the Bunkers'
party he can be the
highlight of the night, who is served by a smiling bartender. At this
point
everything is perfectly all right, just as he could have expected it to
happen.

The adventure starts to turn into a nightmare when the storm comes.

It may be a
weird idea to suggest, but let's propose that this
wasn't just an ordinary
summer storm, but some special one, a kind of
'timeslide' that takes our hero
to a different time level, maybe a few years ahead. This was probably
not the

intention of the author, but let's try to interpret the story this way. Neddy is taken to the near future, without noticing it, where his fortune is already gone, his children are ill and everything has gone fatally wrong. However, he doesn't know anything about it.

The first premonition could emerge in him when he suddenly finds that the Welchers has gone away and their swimming-pool is drained. The dry pool is not only a breach in his chain, but a symbol of decay as well. The life-sustaining water in it was only there until the Welchers had money, and there is no life after bankruptcy in this neighborhood. The Welchers' tragedy foreshadows what is going to happen — or actually what has already happened to Neddy, who gradually starts to realize physically that something is wrong, but he can't perceive it mentally.

The futile and senseless adventure culminates in Neddy's crossing the motorway in his trunks. As he is standing on the shoulders of Route 424, waiting for a chance to cross and being constantly humiliated by the by-passing people, he can only think of living up to his own expectations. No matter how silly the task may be, once he decided that he would do it, he has to do it. A Neddy Merrill can't retreat. Such a failure simply wouldn't fit into the image that he wants himself and the outer world to have about him. He turned himself into a chased animal, running away from some imaginary predator that can be his fate, reaching him at the very end of the story.

The public pool, stinking of chlorine is in sharp contrast with the luxurious pools he has gone thorough so far. It's for ordinary people, who are required to take a shower, use the footbath and wear identification disks in the pool. Neddy tries to accommodate himself to these conditions, but he feels superior enough to the lifeguards not to bother about them screaming at him. However, this incident also shows that Neddy has lost the privileges that he used to have as a rich person, since he is dealt with just as any other regular visitor. The same rules apply to him as well. However, he tries to ignore these warning signs and only concentrate on his lunatic mission.

He regards it much more natural to use the Hallorans' pool according to their conditions, completely naked, than using an identification disk at the public pool. The

Hallorans are enormously rich and whatever expectations they have towards others, it should be respected. It is them who first mention him his misfortunes, but Neddy attributes this remark to their eccentric behavior in general. Here we should return to our "timeslide"-theory. Other explanations, like interpreting the whole story as a dream or say that they were already bankrupt at the Westerhazy's pool and Neddy in fact went mad as a result of this, are also possible, but seem to be either "cheap tricks" or logically questionable. There's no sign of anything being wrong at the beginning, the Westerhazy's pool is completely like an earthly paradise. Then we can either see the whole story as an absurd one that should be interpreted symbolically and in this case it's about the fragility of human existence based on material wealth, or we can use our "timeslide"-theory, which may sound a bit like another chapter from the X-Files series, but at least it's still the most logical solution.

After Mrs. Halloran's eerie remark, there are more and more signs of things gone really wrong during the time Neddy lost because of the timeslide. His friend Eric was operated three years ago, but Neddy can't recall anything about it, so this is the minimum length of the missing time. Eric's navel is gone and it makes Neddy think that his buddy has lost the link to his birth. Here we can also mention a more subconscious reason for his attraction to the element of water, namely the desire to imitate the fetal phase of his existence by floating in water instead of the amniotic fluid. Swimming for him is complete escapism, and the pool a kind of sanctuary where he can hide from his life, perverted by over-materialistic society.

At the Biswangers' party he is regarded as a gatecrasher, an unwanted guest. This party is just the opposite of the Bunkers' party at the beginning. Grace Biswanger's behavior is sharply in contrast with Enid Bunker's, though their relationship to Neddy must have been pretty much the same when Neddy was rich. However, when Enid sees him he is still rich, but at the Biswanger's do, after the timeslide and all the misfortunes that took place during the missing years, he has already lost his previous status – without knowing about it. Here he is served by a rude bartender contrasted to the smiling one at the Bunkers' party.

His old mistress Shirley is deeply embarrassed to see him and refers to him

asking her
for money previously. (Of course, the timeslide theory only makes sense
if we
suppose that at the point when the storm reaches him, he
doesn't disappear for
all those years but also continues to live his life. Basically Neddy
Merrill
splits into to Neddies, one who suffers all the misfortunes during
these years,
and his other self, the one the story is about, who has to face his
negative
future right after an idyllic situation.)
The fact that he actually had a mistress also provides a
kind of moral
background to the story, since it reveals the fact that Neddy is not an
entirely honest person, he cheated on his wife, and maybe he deserved
to go
through this ordeal.

Looking at
the sky, the constellations he sees are not the ones that are
characteristic of
midsummer, so he understands that he became unstuck in time. This
revelation
makes him cry. Gone are the enthusiasm about the crazy adventure, and
the
superior self-confidence which powered him during the
'expedition'. He can't
even dive to the Gilmartins' pool, he's not a macho
any more. In the Clydes'
pool he can hardly swim, he feels old and tired, and in fact he got
older, his
physical endurance declined and now he has to face it.

Arriving at
his abandoned house, Neddy has come full circle. His situation seems to
be
absolutely hopeless, the heaven at the Westerhazy's has been
turned into hell.
There he stands in his wet trunks, shivering in the cold, besides the
crumbling
skeleton of his former home. Could all this happen because of that
summer storm
that was in fact a timeslide?