



Suburban Space and Existential Crisis in John Cheever's *The Swimmer*

BAI Chenying^{[a],*}

^[a]Associate Professor. School of Foreign Languages, Zhejiang Agriculture and Forestry University, Hangzhou, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

John Cheever's many short stories are set in suburbia, which is prosperous in economy and material resources, and becomes a symbol of status. As a landmark of American middle class, this space is not only the geological scene of the plot or the platform of characters, but also a social communication arena which is intertwined with all kinds of social interaction and conflicts, and the spiritual trauma of the middle class, exposing the crisis of existence and identification. Spatial criticism focuses on the socio-cultural attributes of space. Literary space, in turn, is regarded as a referential system with multi-dimensional denotations. This paper adapts Lefebvre's Spatial Theory to explore the physical, the social and spiritual signification of space in the representative of John Cheever's short story, *The Swimmer*. It intends to expose the living conditions of American middle class both materially and mentally during the 20th century and analyze the spiritual crisis which results from interpersonal indifference and loss of belief, so as to develop further appreciation of this novel.

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

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INTRODUCTION

John Cheever (1912 - 1982) is one of the most prestigious short story writers in modern America. He was born

into a middle-class New England family in Quincy, Massachusetts. John Cheever has soaked up the juice of his homeland and integrated its many elements into his writing. Most of his novels are mainly set in this background and focus on its traditions, values, manners, mores and the spiritual unease, for which he is dubbed "the Chekhov of the exurbs". His works were compiled together and published as *Collected Stories and Other Writings*(1978), received the 1979 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, the National Book Critics Circle Award and the American Book Award, causing a huge hit in public immediately as well as bringing Cheever firm reputation and popularity.(Bailey, 2009) With his genius of sombre reflection on human morality, spirituality, particularly the duality of human nature, his works are characterized by the profound sense of anxiety of middle class identity and identification. *The Swimmer* (1964) is one of his most famous short stories. It is set in suburban New York City, and on the whole depicts Neddy's eventful eight-mile homeward swimming journey. At the beginning of the journey, Neddy kept optimistic and performed energetically as a young explorer. As the journey went on, it became harder and harder. The weather changed, and he felt tired and cold. His neighbors seemed strange and rude to him. when Neddy found his house empty which at once reminded him of failures in finance and family, he was overwhelmed by a heavy disappointment and got trapped in despair.

This short novel drew super-wide attention from literary critics for its unique plot, profound theme, mythological origins and so on. Some scholars paid full attention to its images. For example, Edward Reilly (1980) analyzed the characteristics of its scenery and colors. Some are interested in making comparison and contrast with other works such as *The Great Gatsby* (Allen, 1989), *Peter Rugg, the Missing Man* by William Austin (Mathew, 1992), the Holy Grail legends from *Bible* (Blythe & Sweet, 1992), and Dante's *Inferno* (Kozikowski, 1993). Scholars' interest in *The Swimmer* has never been

declined and efforts to unfold its charm have never been ceased. Marked by stories' common settings of middle class's typical settlement and theme of middle class crisis, Cheever's works are noticed to have something to do with spatial issues, the discovery of which is worth our further exploring and confirming.

Literary space criticism is a literary criticism method rising from "Space turn" of humanities and social discipline. It takes space in literature as the object of criticism. Literary space is the transformation, transfer and transcendence of people's living space. Living space undergoes author's selection, redefinition and creation, transformed into literary space, embodying authors' aesthetics, outlook and humanistic concept. Space theory is based on the transformation stage between living space and literary space, and intends to explore external regulation of authors' inner world and values. Henri Lefebvre is the pioneer of space researches with his masterpiece *The Production of Space* (1974), in which, he brilliantly divides space into three aspects, respectively physical space, social space and spiritual space. Each of the aspects are closely correlated. Physical space is the space in physical state, and is able to be perceived by human senses. Social space is the inter-personal space, and the construction of relationship of various social factors, placing emphasis mainly on politics, economy, power, race, class and culture. Spiritual space is the interior space constructed through the edition of and the projection onto the exterior world by human emotions and consciousness. *The Swimmer* exposes a special physical space—a typical suburban settlement for middle class. By doing this, Cheever pushes the narrative process, shapes characters and constructs the story. The suburban space is not only the geological scene of the plot or the platform of characters, but also a social communication arena which is intertwined with all kinds of social interaction and conflicts, and the spiritual trauma of the middle class, exposing the crisis of existence and identification. Accordingly, this paper probes into the physical, social and spiritual signification of space in *The Swimmer*, aiming at exposing the living conditions of American middle class both materially and mentally during the 20th century and exploring the spiritual crisis which results from interpersonal indifference and loss of belief.

1. PHYSICAL SPACE-PROSPEROUS SETTLEMENT

"The fields we are concerned with are, first, the physical-nature, the Cosmos." (Lefebvre, 1992, p.11) Somewhere events take place is called physical space or topographical space. Zoran states topographical space is like a static entity which can be either a series of counterpart space concepts like outside and inside, village and city, or

form space where people and stuff exist like reality and dreamland. (Zoran, 1984) The text shapes the topographical structure through descriptions, which makes it spatially unique and special. The middle class county in *The Swimmer* is located in the north of New York and west of Connecticut. It is acknowledged as prosperous and affluent county. Neddy's home is in Bullet Park, eight miles to the south. This visual experience of course is helpful to cultivate readers' awareness of physical space.

American middle class arose in the free economy of 19th century. They are composed of the large - scale farmers. Though they dwelt in countryside, the farmers promoted the Capital mode of production and lifestyle by investing in the industries of real estate, cotton and railways. In the middle and late 19th century, with a series of major technological inventions and the arrival of the industrial age, there emerged small business owners among the farmers and they soon constituted the antecedents of American middle class. At the end of 19th century, America has entered urban industrial society formally, becoming a big industrial nation. With the process of industrialization and monopoly, most of those small business owners had lost their capital asset in the middle of 20th century. Thereupon, they had to work for big capitalists and earn salaries by providing service of professional knowledge and technology, turning into the newly-developed middle class or the white-collar workers. The scale of middle class expanded with the prosperity of economy after the WWII. Encouraged by the emergence of new cities of wartime production and government assistance for veterans, increasing numbers of Americans middle class flocked to settle in suburbs. The decentralization of post-World War II American cities led to the self-sufficiency of the suburbs around the urban core.

Neddy's county is such a typical settlement for middle class. Though Cheever pays little attention to the landscape of it, he leads us successfully to the comfortable county where every house is spacious and is surrounded by lovely garden, lawn and pool. Everything there has been arranged in order and architecture construction is done in a classic way. Beautiful yards and pools emerge frequently in the text.

Admittedly, the pool is the core image of the story for it is the key spot of Neddy's homeward journey. In total, there are fifteen pools involved, including fourteen private pools and one public. Those pools connect, and they constitute the so-called Lucinda River. Neddy names the series of pools Lucinda River after his wife's name. Where there is a private pool there is a house. Pool and yard, both of which are categorized as constructions of the same property, thus, they can be seen as integrated.

The journey began with Westerhazys' pool. That pool was attractive, "The pool fed by an artesian well with a high iron content, was a pale shade of green." (Cheever, 1978, p.726) How comfortable it would be to swim in

such pool! It's the good quality of water that prompted Neddy to go home by swimming. Additionally, the flowing trees and roses in Graham's yard indicated that the pool would not be disappointing. Still in Bunker's, "The water refracted the sound of voices and laughter." (Cheever, 1978, p.728) and "How bonny and lush were banks of the Lucinda River!" (Cheever, 1978, p.728). The exciting scene along the river encouraged Neddy to go on. However, Levy's yard made him hesitate and stop advancing. And the dry pool, dead plants, closed doors and windows of Levy's house came to be a turning point for Neddy's journey. Lancaster's was worse, for the water was dirty and stingy and its host was unfriendly rude. The rest became more terrible. Hallorans' old pool was disgusting and Sachses' pool was even freezing. According to the appearance of the pools, Neddy's trip can be divided into two parts. The beginning part (before Levy's) was bright while the latter was dark. The pools mirror their owners' experiences. They are invariably suffering remarkable economic distress and have lost the sense of decent lives. The pools are also signs of decline. In 1950s, American white-collar workers outnumbered the blue-collar workers for the first time. The newly-developed middle class were mainly intellectuals, technicians and managers. Without any capital asset, they have to rely on big capitalists for survival. The economic inequality keeps rising, the high or rising poverty rates have become indicators of increasingly unequal opportunities. Many people have a gloomy perspective of future life: the improbability to achieve a happy, satisfying and worthwhile life.

Another connotative image, the Japanese lantern of Levy's door is also impressive. *The Swimmer* was published in 1960s. And reflecting on international affairs during that period, you will soon be aware of the tense relationship between America and Japan. After Pearl Harbor was attacked in WWII, Americans hated Japan to the hell for the huge loss. Later, America began cold war with Soviet Union, in which they paid a lot. The Japanese lantern which was hanging unsteadily in storm hinted the unsteady international relationship and the anxiety of its future international role.

Furthermore, the physical landscape indicates man's inner landscape. The county turned from tranquil pastoral to be stagnant, exposing the atmosphere of dark shadows. When reading closely, we would realize that actually it is a kind of waking dream. The swimming journey constitutes an escape from a nightmare or from realities that have become a nightmare. It also establishes the atmosphere of dark shadows and tensions of which Neddy will soon be conscious, and the reader gets aware that a terrible panic is just barely under control. The optimistic mode at the beginning of the journey is not real. It is illusion. Far beyond that, the author brings our attention back to the cruel reality at the end of the journey, to be exact, the despair over an empty house. Through that, he

actually heightened the barely under control terrible panic.

The text indicates the structure by means of direct description, and the narrative may contribute to reconstruct the topographical structure. (Zoran, 1984) Description of residential houses and individual possessions, occasional appearance of network of expressways and surprisingly jammed traffic, as well as accidental mentions of recreational places in effect distinctly present a typical picture of a suburban New York city and acquaint readers well with the affluent but depressing county. Apart from prompting readers to form visual impression on the settlement, physical space functions further more than the container permitting a sequel of events to happen, but also the symbol for local culture, and indicate the human relations in this county.

2. SOCIAL SPACE-INDIFFERENT COMMUNITY

Social space is the materialization of social beings, and it incorporates social actions. (Lefebvre, 1992). Social space is produced by a specific society, meanwhile, it provides a platform for various social beings to continuously communicate. Thereupon social space reflects social life and interpersonal relationships by exposing people's social action. Based on this mutual effect, Lefebvre puts forward the idea that social space originated from society can produce a society too, and he develops social space into three aspects, respectively "spatial practice", "representation of space" and "representational space" (1992, pp.38-40). Briefly speaking, "spatial practice" refers to observed space, more specific daily activities in social space; "representation of space", also called the conceived space, is conceived by architects and governors which relates to and interposes production of space directly; "representational space" is the life space or image space, which is bound up with artists or writers' creation. Social space is both a production and a force. On the one hand, space is shaped through various ranges of social procedures and human activities. On the other hand, space affects and changes the possibilities of human's thoughts and actions.

Neddy's neighbors show up at the opening part. Some have finished Service, some are playing golf and tennis ball, some are busy with church and preaching, and others are hunting. Going to church implicates people's religion belief. Playing golf and hunting indicates they are leading relaxing lives. Those activities soon get us know what class they belong to, that is, American middle class.

Apart from that, another three activities are to be highlighted to display the panorama of 1960s America, that is, going to party, drinking, and swimming. There are lots of parties in this county, and Neddy even has met "a smiling bartender at a hundred parties" (Cheever, 1978, p.728). Usually a party is held to gather people and help to

establish friendly relationship. However, the parties in this county completely turn into a drinking banquet. Everyone present indulge himself in heavy drinking. And “I drank too much last night” (Cheever, 1978, p. 726) became the conventional greetings. Even the priests are drunkard in the endless parties. For a period, the concept of drinking being evil was prevailing and lots of religious pioneers advocated campaign against drinks. Accordingly, The Temperance Movement in US lasted nearly one hundred years. However, when *The Swimmer* was published, *the Dry Law* had long been canceled and middle class tended to bury themselves in drinks so as to escape from existential crisis and anxiety temperately. Frequent parties and abundant drinks mirror their extravagant lifestyle and shortage of moral restrictions. Besides, swimming home through private pools in the novel is much more than playing sport. It equally hints the luxury for private pool costs a large sum of money. Each household in this county owns a pool in the yard. Obviously, they paid little attention to the American tradition of frugality and diligence in such affluent county.

Space is not only the locale where all social activities unfold but also the arena of conflicts and contradictions as “space is a set of relations and forms” (Lefebvre, 1992, p.116). Cheever is good at depicting individuals in conflict with others. He has stunned his audience by his meditation on the hypocrisy and detachment— which can unequivocally be visited in *The Swimmer*. Nearly all the so-called friends appeared in Neddy’s homeward swimming journey though it cost him less than half a day. And the owners of the fifteen pools responded variously. In Grahams’ pool, Mrs. Graham welcomed warmly as soon as she saw Neddy. “What a marvelous surprise. I’ve been trying to get you on the phone all morning.”(Cheever, 1978, p.728) She intended to invite Neddy for the party, but she hasn’t done that. Then, the friendly greetings were merely out of etiquette. And the fake hospitality exactly mirrored remote distance between them, which was again confirmed by Neddy’s fear that if he refused the Grahams’ drink, he would agonize them. When Neddy crossed the Lindley’s riding ring, he was shocked by the mess and wondered if the Lindleys had sold their horses or had gone for a summer vocation, for “he seemed to remember having heard something about Lindley and their horses.”(Cheever, 1978, p.730) If Neddy really got along well with this family, how he could be unwilling to take trouble to get the news confirmed, showing care for a friend instead of letting it go and leaving the memory dizzy. It was the same case with the Welchers, who had been away and intended to sell house, where Neddy again failed to get the exact time of their last contact. Neddy’s ignorance of his neighbors’ going-about, to some extent, proved his unwillingness to know others and indifference to people around. He, in return, also was seriously hurt by such insincerity and indifference from

his neighbors.

Neddy got a serious stroke when he reached the public pool with cloudy and icy water. It states “All Swimmers Must Wear Their Identification Disks”(Cheever, 1978, p.732). What’s worse, a pair of lifeguards whistled at Neddy and treated him as an outsider. It is just such another that Grace Biswanger, who insistently sent Neddy invitations though rebuffed each time, treated him in an unexpected way. Grace had spread out the message that Neddy got bankrupt and made Neddy humiliated. At her parties, Grace tried to establish a strong business relationship with elites from whom she could get useful information. Neddy despised such secular values before he went bankrupt, but as a matter of fact he behaved as the saying goes, “the pot called the kettle black”. To some degree, responses from both sides altogether reflected the invisible standard revolving around wealth for making friends. Money worship had been injected to and poisoned the whole class. Soon, Neddy got the deadly stroke from his former mistress, Shirley Adams. Neddy once treated their affair as “the supreme elixir, the pain killer, the brightly colored pill” (Cheever, 1978, p.736), but now, he was rejected for a cup of wine since the bankruptcy. The swimming journey unwrapped completely the veil of warmth and affirm the creed that “the commercial relations which the use of money presupposes and induces attain social existence only once they are projected onto the terrain in the shape of relational networks.” (Lefebvre, 1992, p.120) Then it is reasonable to refer to those relationships in the text as commercial product. And its social space is a market centering on commercial benefits.

Obviously, Neddy was not the single one who betrayed his/her spouse, as which could be deduced from the fact of flirtation in Grace’s party, where after dinner participants told dirty stories to mixed companies. They were stuck in a moral crisis lacking of true respect for God and marriage. It was a world where each one merely concentrated on his own privileges. American middle class physically stayed intimate but mentally remote, and they are occupied with the notions of materialism and money worship rather than responsibility for themselves, families or society. This way of life is in conflict in many ways with American values and ethics. As American society is becoming more and more money-oriented, dollars speak louder than everything. The permanent webs, such as the husband-wife, father-son, father-daughter relationships, which were firmly believed in the past, are by no means fixed. Under the influence of highly commercialized capitalist society, the private morality—a sense of the purely personal honor, honesty, and integrity -has been declining, and the inter-personal relations are worsening accordingly. The hypocritical world disclosed Neddy’s isolated mental world in turn.

3. SPIRITUAL SPACE-FROM CONFIDENT EXPLORER TO DEJECTED SEARCHER

Spiritual space is something bridging physical space and social space, and it is supposed to be exposed from personal physical activities. In *The Swimmer*, along with his emphasis on human relations, Cheever incorporates spiritual pain and psychic unrest of the chaotic society into his fiction, where individuals are in conflict with their community and then the world. Neddy is portrayed to be a vigorous and optimistic middle-aged man at the opening part of the story. However, everything changes for the worse as his voyage begins. According to the development of his journey, there emerged two Neddys, the first Neddy is a confident explorer while the other a dejected searcher. The following will proceed with his life experience as well as his homeward journey and disclose his existential crisis.

Neddy's decision of homeward swimming was out of impulsiveness. He has been a father of four daughters, so he was no longer young though he was energetic and in good shape "with the especial slenderness of youth" (Cheever, 1978, p.726). Surely his impulsive behavior was contradictory to his age. When Neddy first showed up, people around were all drunk except Neddy who remained awake "sitting by the green water, one hand in it, one around a glass of gin for he was 'a pilgrim, an explorer, a man with a destiny'" (Cheever, 1978, p.727). Thus it can be interpreted that Neddy chose to stay with neighbors and had gin together but in a small amount, simply out of customary politeness. After all, it's not easy for Neddy to keep a high profile alone. Nevertheless, confronted with the declining surroundings, Neddy didn't escape but choose to explore a new beautiful world. That's the major stimulus for his swimming journey home. And the sunny weather, clear water and beautiful scenes brought him confidence in accomplishing the grand task.

To accomplish his goal, he tried his best to avoid being distracted by any temptation, telling himself constantly that he was "a pilgrim, an explorer, a man with a destiny". And in the previous half trip he did succeed. "Like any explorer, that the hospital customs and traditions of the natives would have to be handled with diplomacy if he was ever going to reach his destination." (Cheever, 1978, p.728) For example, as welcomed warmly by the first household, Neddy caught a proper chance to slide away without making the host unpleasant. Similarly, in the third household where a grand party was being held, the prosperity of which impressed Neddy so much that for one moment he "felt a passing affection for the scene, a tenderness for the gathering, as if he might touch" (Cheever, 1978, p.728), but soon he got over it and realized his great plan, "anxious not to get stuck in any conversation that would delay his voyage" (Cheever, 1978, p.729) as greeting a group of guests there. On the whole, until then, nearly half the length of Lucinda River was covered and everything went smoothly as expected. And Neddy felt tired but pleased in the process of putting

into practice the special and ambitious blueprint. When he got cut by grass and heard the unexpected thundering, he advanced without any hesitation. He sets himself in optimistic, self-disciplined and ambitious spiritual space.

Unfortunately, situation changed in accordance with the weather. Neddy was once caught in an awful abyss of which he would never be able to get out. Neddy had no shelter from the unexpected storm except Levy's gazebo. Waiting there alone, he began to think of his miserable life. Neddy got disappointed at the reality and became less confident. His disappointment became more serious as he found the next pool dry as described "the breach in his chain of water disappointed him absurdly, and he felt like some explorer who seeks a torrential headwater and finds a dead stream." (Cheever, 1978, p.730) All in a sudden the designed blueprint became meaningless and Neddy saw no ending of the dark tunnel. Making it worse, when crossing the Route 424 on bare foot, Neddy was considered as a fool and exposed to all kinds of ridicule like beer cans, rags and blowout patches. Ashamed and agonized, Neddy almost gave up his task of exploring a beautiful world as he said to himself that "he could have gone back, back to the Westerhazy's, where Lucinda would still be sitting in the sun." (Cheever, 1978, p.731) It is completely understandable that he lost in such a passive thought, when he could enjoy himself on a fine day instead of seeking for something intangible in heavy rain strenuously. At this moment, his spiritual world turned into dark and hopeless. He lost faith in purity, lost belief in bright future and even the confidence to conquer obstacles. The sharp contrast between his first spiritual world and current one was explicated by the idea that "spatiality is characterized by a death instinct which only proliferates when it enters into conflict with itself and seeks its own destruction" (Lefebvre, 1992, p.135).

Despite mountains of setbacks, Neddy had no choice but to go on. It cost him long time to cross the Route 424 for the next pool. To his disappointment, the next pool was no better than a dry one. Except for the pool's stinky smell, people appeared unfriendly and someone even yelled at Neddy and commanded him to get out the pool as quickly as possible. So Neddy ran away to the Hallorans' for comfort where in result he was treated indifferently. More awfully, his mood was brought down lower when he was suddenly informed of recent misfortunes which Neddy himself attempted to deny. Evidently, the news was a terrible hit to Neddy because instantly he thought that the whole swimming was a ridiculous idea since he was not as strong as before, "his legs felt rubbery and ached at the joints. The worst of it was the cold in his bones and the feeling that he might never be warm again." (Cheever, 1978, p.733) To cheer himself up, he had to resort to drinks. But drinking could not save him, for the deadly blow finally came: when he arrived home exhausted, he got astonished by the empty

house and the broken up family. "The house was locked... He shouted, pounded on the door, tries to force it with his shoulder, and then looking in at the windows, saw that the place was empty." (Cheever, 1978, p.737)

It is ever-present in *The Swimmer* that an old man endeavors to subdue his chagrin of aging. He tries to regain his lost youth, energy and ambition but fails. It is undeniable that Neddy was once a typical member of middle class who lead a luxurious life and had immoral extramarital affair. On that Sunday afternoon, he made up his decision to go back to traditional saintly life. However, his newly built spiritual world with confidence to erase previous mistakes was crushed. His dream of swimming home and get united with wife and daughters dashed to the ground. Crises pervades the novel, and it became a compression of nightmares in which Neddy was caught in lost, both spiritual and economical bankruptcy, eccentricity, exile, sin and the abyss. From the confident explorer to dejected searcher, Neddy experienced failure in career and life. And just because of that failure, he did not realize the middle class identification, which ultimately brought the holy exploring into a desperate ending. The suffering of Neddy constituted the typical portraiture of miserable middle-class in America.

CONCLUSION

John Cheever is an expert in depicting the true America. Despite the fact that he narrowed characters down to members of middle class, generally situated them in a fictional county and focused on their daily life, he was endowed with a much stronger voice for the society of 20th century, and was believed to be more convincing to readers. Therefore, his works enable us to know a lot about America.

John Cheever made his characters be surrounded by financial disaster, frustration, tension, apprehension and grief. He could not help feeling that "there must be a

worm in the rosy apple". Thereupon, he never stopped the quest for a possible solution which lead people out of the decaying society, enable people to see through the lie of affluence, prosperity, and finally re-endow people with real happy life. His quest actually lies in his works: the effort to forge a bridge between the terrible realities of postwar American life and the remaining aspiration. This paper has probed into his representative work from the perspective of physical, social and spiritual space, exposed the living conditions of American middle class both materially and mentally and analyzed the spiritual crisis which results from interpersonal indifference and loss of belief. From this, the author of this paper hopes it will be helpful to enable us to get some inspiration to solve the modern spiritual crisis.

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