CHEEVER'S DARK KNIGHT OF THE SOUL: THE FAILED QUEST OF NEDDY MERRILL

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Although critics, including ourselves, have noted many minor patterns throughout "The Swimmer" such as the color imagery (Graves 4-5), the Shakespearian parallels (Bell 433-36), the names (Byrne 326-27), an historical allusion (Blythe and Sweet 557-59), and the autumnal images (Reilly 12), all have overlooked the major pattern that dominates and hence illuminates Cheever's story. In 1967 Cortland Auser suggested that Cheever "created an imaginative and vital myth of time and modern man" that "uses the age-old themes of quest, journey, initiation, and discovery" (18). Auser, however, failed to note the specific myth that undergirds the story as well as the ramifications of Cheever's choice of that myth. A close examination of the characters, events, and settings of "The Swimmer" reveals that Cheever has patterned Neddy Merrill's journey on the familiar archetype of the Grail quest. In fact, Cheever includes so much Grail paraphernalia that he forces his audience to consider the contrast between Neddy Merrill and the traditional Grail hero. Only by recognizing this pattern can readers fully understand the story's final scene, that is, the ultimate failure of Neddy's quest.

Cheever immediately establishes the world of "The Swimmer" as a modern version of what Jessie Weston, author of the definitive study of the Grail myth, From Ritual to Romance, calls the Waste Land (12). Cheever's world is certainly one devoid of spiritual meaning and filled with materialism. Everybody from the suburban socialites to the priest have had too much to drink. Sunday is supposed to be a day of worship, but in Cheever's story a sybaritic, hedonistic lifestyle is what is revered. Throughout the story, in fact, the vast majority of the citizens do only one thing, party, and the main social ritual observed is drinking. Since, according to Weston, the cup is one of the two primary Grail symbols, and in this case it is used only for selfish enjoyment, Cheever is obviously underscoring how far his suburbanites have strayed from the original spiritual values espoused in the Grail myth.

In paragraph two Cheever introduces his protagonist in language that marks him as a potential Grail hero. Neddy Merrill is a "legendary figure" (604) with the feeling he is "a man with a destiny" (604). Cheever emphasizes that Neddy stands out because of his "slenderness of youth" (603) and his general physical prowess; he dives headfirst into the pool, demonstrating his swimming ability and showing "an inexplicable
contempt” (604) for those who do not plunge into the pool, or who lie about passively. With four lovely daughters and a wife as well as a mistress, Neddy certainly possesses the characteristic of the Grail hero that Weston calls “virility” (23).

Like other Grail heroes, Neddy decides to set off on a perilous quest: “he could reach his home by water” (603). Here, though, Cheever makes a significant shift in the myth. Whereas most Grail heroes quest to restore the sick Fisher King (and hence regenerate the Waste Land), Cheever makes Neddy himself also the Fisher King. According to Weston, the Fisher King is the leader of society “suffering from infirmity caused by wounds, sickness, or old age” (20). What Neddy does not realize, but what Cheever makes clear, is that Neddy is himself aging: “he was far from young” (603) and “he might have been compared to a summer’s day, particularly the last hours of one” (603). Cheever implies, then, the essentially selfish nature of Neddy’s quest; he acts not for community, but self. That his ultimate goal is purely egocentric—eros, not agape—is stressed when he visits his ex-mistress to find “Love—sexual roughhouse in fact . . . the supreme elixir, the pain killer, the brightly colored pill that would put the spring back into his step, the joy of life in his heart” (611).

Separating from his social group, Neddy begins the initiatory phase of his journey by passing through the boundary of the Westerhazy hedge and setting out “by an uncommon route” (604). He must pass over “a thorny ledge” and cross hazardous streets (604). Along this “road of trials,” he encounters a series of traditional Grail obstacles. The unpleasantries range from “The gravel cut his feet” (605) to bartenders who snub him and hostesses who insult him. Typically, the Grail hero must encounter a dark tower. Appropriately, Cheever has Neddy swim close to the side of a pool to avoid colliding with the rubber raft of Rusty Towers. Later, at a public pool Neddy is threatened and chased by a pair of foreboding lifeguards “in a pair of towers” (608). Hearing a whistle, Neddy, momentarily disoriented as to time, thinks about the train station and the proverbial figures who dwell there, “a dwarf with some flowers . . . and a woman who had been crying” (606). Weston notes that women usually weep over the bier of a dead knight (49-50), but in Cheever the tears are probably for something no more significant than a male departing on a commuter train. When the archetypal storm with its thunder and lightning attacks him with lashing rain, a powerful wind, and an explosion, Neddy must seek refuge in the suburban equivalent of the Chapel Perilous, the Levys’ gazebo. Weston details how Gawain “on his way to the Grail castle . . . is overtaken by a terrible storm and coming to a chapel standing at a crossways in the middle of the forest enters for shelter” (175). Grail knights usually find lighted candles, but Neddy in a
shelter surrounded by the familiar Grail trappings of oak trees and fountains discovers only souvenir Japanese lanterns that Mrs. Levy had bought in Kyoto (606). Even the Chapel Perilous is filled with twentieth-century materialism.

Cheever also employs the Grail myth parallel between the world of nature and the world of man, a correspondence that Weston believes goes back to the ancient fertility rituals (1-11, 52-64). As the Fisher King, Neddy grows older and more feeble; simultaneously the day begins to dwindle and the seasons to turn from summer to autumn. The beautiful sunny skies are darkened by the storm. The temperature drops and Neddy begins to shiver. The maple now has “red and yellow leaves” such that Neddy thinks the tree “blighted” (606). The Lindleys’ is “overgrown with grass” (606) and the horses are missing; Weston describes how the questor, after leaving the Chapel Perilous, often encounters a stolen “foal” (177-78). The Welchers’ pool is “dry” (606). The Hallorans’ shrubbery is also yellow and “blighted” (608).

During his quest Neddy is also aided by the traditional helper whom both Weston (175) and Jung label “the old man.” This figure usually appears, according to Jung, when the hero is in “a hopeless and desperate situation” (217). In the midst of “his most difficult portage,” Neddy, “close to naked,” must cross a hazardous boundary, Route 424. Standing amidst “beer cans, rags, and blowout patches—exposed to all kinds of ridicule” (607), Neddy is attacked with jeers and beer cans. Finally, just as his quest seems doomed to stasis, he is aided when “an old man . . . let him get to the middle of the road” (607).

Having firmly implanted the notion of Neddy Merrill as modern Grail hero in his audience’s mind, Cheever also stresses what Neddy does not do as the Grail hero. According to Weston, one task of the hero is to inquire into the nature of the Grail, the purpose of his quest (14-15). What Cheever emphasizes, however, is that Neddy continually fails to ask the proper questions and to find suitable answers. Throughout his journey, Neddy is, as we have suggested earlier, disoriented as to the passage of time. He does not know what season it is, and in the back of his head he realizes he has a predilection for not thinking: “Was his memory failing or had he so disciplined it in the repression of unpleasant facts that he had damaged his sense of truth?” (607). As he stands beside Route 424, he wonders, “Why . . . was he unable to turn back? Why was he so determined to complete his journey even if it meant putting his life in danger?” (607). Unable to voice these concerns, to ask the proper people, or to answer these questions on his own, he merely reponders them, never pursuing them to final truths. At the end of his journey, he is able to wonder only, “Was he losing his memory, had his gift for concealing
painful facts let him forget . . . details of his life?" (609). His constant state, then, is one of being "disappointed and mystified" (606), not enlightened.

To underline Neddy’s unworthiness, Cheever continues to provide his protagonist with helpers, mysterious figures who try to get the questor to see the true nature of his quest. The second manifestation of the wise old man in this story is the Hallorans, who appear at the moment Neddy has reached his nadir. Jung stresses that the sagacious and helpful old man provides "knowledge needed to compensate the [hero’s] deficiency" (217). Typically, Neddy must brave the perils to reach them: "The woods were not cleared and the footing was treacherous and difficult" (608). The Hallorans are old friends, but mysterious. In this twentieth-century Waste Land, they are thought to be communists, they sit around naked, and they have "an uncompromising zeal for reforms" (608). Unlike the other suburbanites, they are "not surprised or displeased to see him" (608). As their nakedness suggests, they are natural woods creatures who not only dwell in the "forest" but have the only pool fed by a stream. They try to force Neddy to see the truth about his life by bringing up his "misfortunes" with his house and children (609), but, of course, Neddy cannot grasp what they are prodding him toward.

Immediately after the Hallorans, Cheever introduces the disfigured man, still another helper who tries to turn Neddy’s quest inward. Importantly, the Sachsies are the only suburbanites who do not offer Neddy a drink; Eric Sachs had to stop after an operation. Here Neddy should be alerted to what excessive drinking can lead to, what happens when one is too much in the social swim, but no illumination occurs. His eyes are drawn to Eric Sachs’s abdomen, where “Gone was his navel, and what, Neddy thought, would the roving hand, bed-checking one’s gifts at 3 A.M., make of a belly with no navel, no link to birth, this breach in the succession?” (610). Obviously Neddy has been led into asking a probative question by the disfigured man, but he never relates Eric Sachs’s obvious distance from birth to his own quest for youth—i.e., he is unable to see that his quest is doomed to failure. In short, as is his pattern, Neddy does not learn sufficiently, a fact confirmed by his jumping in the Sachsies’ pool, where, unable to recognize his physical attrition, he nearly drowns.

Next Cheever brings in another familiar Grail figure, the temptress. The sensuous woman to whom the hero is physically attracted, she is ultimately unattainable, and, according to Weston, she often reprimands the hero for his failure (169). As this temptress is sometimes called the Dame du Lac (Lady of the Lake), Cheever appropriately places Shirley Adams, Neddy’s ex-mistress, by the “cerulean water” (611). Neddy apprehends her only in the physical—her “figure,” her “hair the color of
brass," and the fact that they once engaged in "sexual roughhouse" (611). In her bathhouse Neddy even spots his replacement, "a young man" (611), but he still does not focus on his own advancing age. In a key moment, temptress Shirley chastises him, "Good Christ. Will you ever grow up?" (611), but Neddy still cannot grasp the immature, selfish nature of his quest. On the verge of revelation, of asking the proper questions, Neddy spots an autumnal constellation and wonders why it is there, but all he can do is cry because he is "bewildered" (612).

At the end of the quest, according to Weston, the Grail hero arrives at the Grail castle, and, if worthy (proven by brave deeds and proper questions), he is granted a vision of the Grail; subsequently, the "freeing of the waters" occurs by which the Fisher King is healed and the land restored (Weston 21-33). At the conclusion of "The Swimmer," however, a "stooped" and "hobbled" (612) Neddy arrives at his goal, his house, but is mystified: "he had done what he wanted, he had swum the county, but he was so stupefied with exhaustion that his triumph seemed vague" (612). Fittingly "the place was dark . . . the doors were locked and rust came off the handles onto his hands" (612). Unable to get in, Neddy peers through the windows for his vision; all he finds is "the place was empty" (612). What Cheever indicates here is that Neddy, caught up in the modern myths of Mammonism and the cult of youth, is an unworthy questor.

Ultimately, then, Cheever uses the Grail myth to reveal the ironic gap between his hero's selfish search for his own youth as well as materialism and the traditional Grail hero's selfless, community-serving quest. Neddy, the modern man, has lost his spiritual bearings and the life-saving waters are used solely for pleasurable swims.

WORKS CITED