

JOHN CHEEVER: THE MAKING OF THE CHEEVERESQUE WRITING STYLE IN THE 1950S

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Abstract

While it is firmly established that Pulitzer Prize winning author John Cheever honed his distinctive Cheeveresque writing style during the decade of the 1950s, no scholar or literary commentator has truly captured the essence of the motivating forces behind Cheever's writing during this decade. Thus, the literary community is bereft of a comprehensive explanation of Cheever's motivating influences that led to the Cheeveresque style, which transformed over the decade from a juxtaposition of the superficial and hidden aspects of suburban life into a commentary on confinement in life. This paper first reviews three simplistic explanations that have been conventionally posited to explain the forces behind the development of the Cheeveresque style, and then examines seven factors that more substantially contributed to fostering the Cheeveresque style. By examining Cheever's published journals and letters, comments from interviews he granted while alive, and remarks made by his children after his death, and integrating published material concerning influential people and events associated with his writing for the New Yorker magazine, a more robust foundation for the development of the Cheeveresque writing style during the 1950s becomes evident.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although today, he is often cast merely as a chronicler of suburban life, John Cheever developed a distinct writing style in the 1950s that elegantly captured the hidden foibles of human beings. "The stories were not *about* suburbia, Cheever would insist," biographer Scott Donaldson wrote. "They were about men and women and children and dogs who happened to live there ... [and] the contrast between their disorderly lives and their handsomely burnished surroundings ... [that] aimed to shut out the ugly, eschew the unseemly, bar the criminal" (141). This is the Cheeveresque style.

While it is established that Cheever's Cheeveresque style was honed during the decade of the 1950s, no scholar or literary commentator has truly captured the essence of the motivating forces that influenced Cheever's writing during the 1950s. Most have instead offered either simplistic explanations or focused on his writing during his later dark period, when alcoholism and infidelity (both homosexual and heterosexual) began to manifest themselves in the 1960s after taking root in his life during the 1950s. One exception is Patrick Meanor, who in his 1995 critical analysis of Cheever's work did posit that his journals (only five percent of which are published) contained "highly personal meditative content" that was "a formulating factor in his burgeoning creative processes" (42-43).

In the twenty-five years since his death in 1982, only one biography of Cheever has surfaced, written by Scott Donaldson and published in 1988. Susan Cheever's memoir published in 1984 provides a small window into her father's writing soul. Both of these works provide a smidgen of insight into the development of the Cheeveresque style, but not a complete look. Until another biography of Cheever is crafted and delves into this fertile territory—a biography is slated to be finished in 2007, written by Blake Bailey, who was granted full access to Cheever's journals, a primary research source denied

Donaldson—the literary community lacks a comprehensive explanation of Cheever’s motivating influences that led to the Cheeveresque style, beyond Meanor’s singular postulation (Beem 22).

This paper, after providing background and reviewing three simplistic conventional explanations for the forces behind the development of the Cheeveresque style in the 1950s, examines seven factors that substantially contributed to fostering Cheever’s creative juices that culminated in the Cheeveresque style. By examining Cheever’s published journals and letters, comments from interviews he granted while alive, and remarks made by his children after his death, and integrating published material concerning influential people and events associated with his writing for the *New Yorker* magazine, a more robust foundation for the development of the Cheeveresque writing style during the 1950s becomes evident.

2 BACKGROUND

The term “Cheeveresque” was first used in the *New York Times* in 1969, according to a search of the digitized archives of the newspaper, when John Leonard wrote a review of Cheever’s third novel, *Bullet Park*: “Bullet Park’s topography may be recognizably Cheeveresque—railroad stations are ‘war-like ruins’; people burn to death when cans of charcoal lighter explode at barbeque parties” (43). The term began to gain popularity in the mid-1980s following Cheever’s death in 1982, and today the term is often used to describe the writing of a plethora of writers following in Cheever’s footsteps.

A bevy of scholars and literary analysts have left little doubt that Cheever’s writing dramatically improved in the decade of the 1950s, from that in the 1930s and 1940s. During the 1950s, two collections of Cheever short stories were published—*The Enormous Radio and Other Stories* in 1953 and *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill and Other Stories* in 1958—in addition to his first novel, *The Wapshot Chronicle*, in 1957. The writing in these three books marks the spawning of the Cheeveresque style. A substantial portion of these short story collections is contained in Cheever’s opus, *The Stories of John Cheever*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1978.

Cheever was a struggling writer for twenty years before 1950, mostly writing fiction for the *New Yorker* magazine. His first collected works, *The Way Some People Live*, was published in 1943. According to an analysis of Cheever’s work by Lynne Waldeland, the stories in this first collection were “adequate but not memorable” since Cheever “limits himself to the conventions of magazine realism” (24). Waldeland characterized this early period of Cheever’s writing as “apprenticeship work when one sees in later stories how far Cheever moves beyond the limited options of the realistic mode” (25).

Cheever acknowledged the deficiencies in his pre-war work. In a 1952 entry in *The Journals of John Cheever*, he wrote: “As part of moving I have had to go through some old manuscripts and I have been disheartened to see that my style, fifteen years ago, was competent and clear and the improvements on it are superficial. I fail to see any signs of maturity, of increased penetration; I fail to see any deepening of my grasp” (25).

In 1953, when *The Enormous Radio and Other Stories* was published, several stories in the volume showed nascent signs of the Cheeveresque touch. Waldeland noted “the successful combination of moral thrust and storytelling skill that emerges in this volume” and the “mixture of everyday details with supernatural occurrences—or at least ominously weighty coincidences—plus the fortuitousness of the ending,” which foreshadowed the coming full Cheeveresque style in his third collection of stories published five years later (35-36). Meanor remarked that “the stories in *The Enormous Radio* are longer, more reflective, and psychologically more probing and complex than his earlier naturalistic stories in *The Way Some People Live*” (57).

The Housebreaker of Shady Hill and Other Stories published in 1958 contained “some of the finest American short stories of the twentieth century,” according to Waldeland (63). Meanor felt that the stories showed “the obvious deepening of Cheever’s ability to develop his characters and to dramatize the agonizing dilemmas they experienced” (76). Singled out for praise were “The Housebreaker of Shady Hill” and “The Country Husband” as exhibiting the quintessential nature of Cheeveresque, the fantastic premise in a suburban setting. Cheever’s capstone achievement during the 1950s, his novel *The Wapshot Chronicle*, was selected for the National Book Award in 1958.

In the course of six years, Cheever’s writing went from merely “competent” to being considered some of the finest American short stories and a novel worthy of a prestigious award, creating the foundation for his future writing success. What were the driving forces that made that happen during the 1950s?

3 SIMPLISTIC EXPLANATIONS

Three conventional explanations are most often offered for the forces behind the development of the Cheeveresque style in the 1950s: maturity, family roots, and moving to the suburbs.

3.1 Maturity

Cheever’s flowering as a writer in the 1950s is often attributed simply by what James O’Hara termed “a dramatic maturing that occurred after his marriage and during his army service from 1942 to 1946” (25). Biographer Donaldson offered up a similar explanation as well:

However discouraged Cheever may have been by the response of publishers and critics to his work, he was sustained by the knowledge that he was growing in his craft. It is arguable that he wrote the best stories of his life during the half-decade after moving to Westchester. (139)

The lack of specificity in the maturity rationale is troubling, especially when the best that Donaldson can offer for a more expansive delving is “the career that looked so dismal in 1951 was shining bright [in 1955] and there were still sunnier days ahead” (146).

3.2 Family Roots

Cheever grew up in a suburban Boston middle-class household with upper-middle-class appearances, “the second son of a North Shore Yankee who lost all his money and some of his mind in the 1929 crash, and an Englishwoman who ran a gift shop to keep the family in baked beans” (S. Cheever, “Duet” 68). His father was 49 when Cheever was born, and he thus felt unwanted and unloved within a family supported only by a working mother. “The bony structure of many of Cheever’s mature stories came from such skeletons in the family closet,” one commentator wrote in 1964 (“Ovid” 68). Certainly, many literary analysts have remarked that the character Leander Wapshot in *The Wapshot Chronicle* was based on Cheever’s father and the short story “Goodbye, My Brother” related to his only brother.

Cheever, however, objected to this biographical parallel that others associated with his writing. In a 1976 interview, he said: “What I usually say is, fiction is not crypto-autobiography: its splendor is that it is not autobiographical. Nor is it biographical. It is a very rich complex of autobiography and biography, of information—factual information, spiritual information, apprehension. It is the bringing together of

disparate elements into something that corresponds to an aesthetic, a moral, a sense of fitness” (Gioia, Dillon, Stillman 66-67).

This comment illustrates Cheever’s complicated thought process that manifested itself in the Cheeveresque style. As George Hunt observed, Cheever possessed an “interanimation of memory and imagination which enabled him to transform effortlessly any personal incident into a magically altered story” (viii). Thus, while Cheever’s early family life was natural fodder for his fiction writing, those experiences by themselves did not drive the Cheeveresque style, only providing one ingredient of an intricate mix that was his writing recipe.

3.3 Moving to the Suburbs

Cheever moved his family from Manhattan to suburban Scarborough, New York, in 1951. Given the coincidental timing of the move with the rise of the Cheeveresque style, the relocation has been equated with the improvement in his writing. Combined with the family roots principle, it does make a compelling consideration, since it certainly is eerie that Cheever recreated his childhood living conditions, a façade of being well off, through the house he rented on the Beechwood estate in Scarborough.

“Living at Beechwood confirmed our family’s special status in the world. We had the luxuries of the very rich—rolling lawns, a swimming pool, gardeners who doffed their caps—but we were tenants, scraping to get by. We were friends of the Vanderslip family, but we were not the Vanderslip family. We lived at Beechwood, but our home was a little house behind a big garage” (S. Cheever, *Home* 82-83).

Living in a suburban, rather than an urban, environment did not specifically inspire Cheever’s writing. In fact, in 1951 he immediately resumed work on his novel in progress under contract to Random House. After submitting a hundred pages late in 1951, an editor told Cheever “he thought the manuscript was without merit” (Donaldson 135). Thus, it was not purely geography that fostered the Cheeveresque style, although it assisted one of the seven contributing factors discussed next.

4 SEVEN CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

There were seven factors that contributed to the development of the Cheeveresque style during the 1950s: father-like figures, gaining financial security, changes in fiction at the *New Yorker*, changes in writing location, journal and letter writing, teaching at Barnard College, and consumption of liquor as a creative juice.

4.1 Father-like Figures

Three editors at the *New Yorker* acted as either mentor, big brother, or surrogate father for Cheever, providing love of literature as a bonding element to substitute for the love that was lacking in Cheever’s own relationship with his biological father. At times in the 1950s, Harold Ross, Gus Lobrano, and Bill Maxwell served in this capacity (as had Malcolm Cowley earlier in Cheever’s writing life) to satisfy Cheever’s longing for a filial relationship.

Cheever, in the preface to *The Stories of John Cheever*, wrote of his relationship with these men: “Harold Ross, Gus Lobrano, and William Maxwell gave me inestimable gifts of a large discerning, and responsive group of readers and enough money to feed the family and buy a new suit every other year” (viii). In *The Journals of John Cheever*, though, Cheever referred to his having “a patriarchal

relationship” with the *New Yorker* (15) and in a 1977 *Newsweek* interview conducted by his daughter Susan, he acknowledged that he viewed Ross as a father figure (S. Cheever, “Duet” 69).

Susan Cheever was quite blunt in her assessment of her father’s needs in this area. “His feelings about his editors there [at the *New Yorker*—Gus Lobrano and Bill Maxwell—were much more than professional,” she wrote in *Home Before Dark*. “If my father was looking for a father, *The New Yorker* was willing. Both Lobrano and Maxwell become close friends of his. He went fishing in Canada with Gus, and Bill and Emily Maxwell saw my parents often” (135).

Lobrano, according to Ross’s biographer Thomas Kunkel, “was great personal friends with many of them [the writers], including Cheever ... and he often had them to his suburban Westchester home for dinner, or to play tennis or badminton” (315). Lobrano also had groups of writers together for lunch where “he inculcated in them a sense of *The New Yorker* as an extended family” (Kunkel 316). Cheever’s wife has said that her husband viewed Lobrano as a surrogate father (Yagoda 290).

Maxwell was a very influential person in Cheever’s life as a mentor, akin to a father figure during the 1950s, even though they had a falling out in the 1960s. This was exhibited not only in the many letters Cheever wrote to Maxwell seeking his advice, but also when Cheever credited Maxwell with his success in writing *The Wapshot Chronicle*. In a letter to Maxwell’s wife, Cheever wrote: “As for the book I sometimes wonder if Bill knows how important he was. One always writes for someone and much of it was written for Bill” (Yagoda 290). The feeling may have been mutual. Cheever received the National Book Award in 1958 for his effort on *The Wapshot Chronicle*; Maxwell was a judge on the selection committee.

Cheever’s son Ben thought the relationship with Maxwell might have once run even deeper. “Both men were beautiful when young. I don’t know if they were attracted to one another. If there was an attraction it faded. What lasted was the shared appetite for excellent prose” (110). At the very least, there was deep friendship between the two men. “Bill was my father’s editor at *The New Yorker*, and they got along remarkably well when you consider that Bill was my father’s editor at *The New Yorker*. That’s a big consider. If you’re a writer and attempting to support a family, and you submit a story to your editor and he turns it down, well that’s a blow to the friendship” (108).

4.2 Gaining Financial Security

Cheever habitually complained about the meager pay he received from the *New Yorker* for his abundant production of short stories, and the resulting stress he felt. For example, from *The Journals of John Cheever* in 1953: “The strains of debt; the difficulty of trying to write one’s way out of it ... I tried unsuccessfully to rip a story out of my brain or to patch together a series of incisive notes with no success at all” (29-30).

But in fact, a change in the payment system at the *New Yorker* instituted by Ross in the late 1940s ensured that Cheever had a financial foundation to continue his writing career and support his family without the need for a day job. Cheever had a first-reading agreement, which paid him an annual signing bonus of several hundred dollars in return for giving the magazine the right of first refusal on all fictional stories that he wrote. If his story was published, he received payment in a complex system of word rates, editor evaluations, multi-story bonuses, and cost of living adjustments (Yagoda 218). “For the first time, writers could make a decent amount of money from *New Yorker* short stories—especially if their word rate was high and they tended to write long,” Ben Yagoda wrote in his history of the *New Yorker* (219).

Cheever received about five thousand dollars a year from the *New Yorker* in 1951, but needed more money to support a suburban lifestyle and sending his children to private school (Donaldson 134). He was awarded a fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation in 1952, which was particularly timely for Cheever, coming at a low point in the writing of his first novel. He also picked up extra money by writing some television scripts in 1953. A key piece of the financial puzzle came in 1956 when he sold the movie rights to “The Housebreaker of Shady Hill” for \$40,000 (Donaldson 149). This payment not only paid off some bills, but helped to finance his family’s trip to Italy in 1957, which aided his writing even more.

4.3 Fiction Style at the *New Yorker*

Cheever was often painted negatively as a writer of formula *New Yorker* stories, but few have focused on the positive impact to Cheever of how the fiction style changed at the *New Yorker* in the 1950s. Kunkel described Ross’s general approach to *New Yorker* stories as:

They weren’t elliptical or overly impressionistic; under Ross’s firm influence, fiction editors preferred that stories be straightforward in the telling. Nor were they ambiguous, at least in terms of the action. Ross did not want to be tricked or make his readers labor too hard to understand what was going on. (311)

Ross made an exception to this principle when he published Cheever’s story “The Enormous Radio” in 1947. Although set in New York City, this story had many Cheeveresque attributes, which one writer characterized as a “perfectly worked-out supernatural yarn, a la television’s *The Twilight Zone*,” when it really was a “profound and stunning comment on the nature of fiction—specifically, fiction in the *New Yorker*” (Yagoda 230). Ross seemed to lighten the grip on his fiction principles following a groundbreaking fact piece published in 1946, “Hiroshima” written by John Hersey at the instigation of *New Yorker* managing editor William Shawn. Ross wrote Cheever: “I’ve just read ‘The Enormous Radio,’ having gone away for a spell ... That piece is worth coming back to work for. It will turn out to be a memorable one, or I am a fish. Very wonderful indeed” (Yagoda 230).

Ross’s publication of Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery” in 1948 extended the type of fiction published in the *New Yorker* beyond the typical realism. Jackson’s tale of ritual stoning in a quaint New England town was a “dose of surrealism” that Ross saw as “an ironic juxtaposition of ancient superstition and modern setting” whereas the story patently “was about evil, its familiarity, its brutality, and its capacity to appear at the least expected places and times” (Yagoda 231-232).

After Ross died in 1951, Shawn was elevated to the top editorial position and he continued to liberalize the magazine’s attitude toward its fiction pieces, particularly in the area of poetry (Yagoda 256). Shawn made few explicit bold moves in the fiction area, but Lobrano and Maxwell as editors could continue to encourage Cheever in his Cheeveresque style.

“The original model for the *New Yorker* short story was journalism; Cheever was moving in the direction of poetry,” Ben Yagoda wrote about Cheever’s writing style in 1951 when “Goodbye, My Brother” was published after Ross’s death (235). Cheever took all the slack on the fiction rope that he could muster. “Flipping to the back pages, one could find contributions ... redolent of the Jazz Age ... but then there was John Cheever, writing fiction that, if you looked at it right, was more thrillingly experimental than what was being produced in any Greenwich Village garret” (Yagoda 239).

The *New Yorker* was certainly no leader in nouveau fiction in the 1950s, but the more relaxed approach under the Shawn regime enabled Cheever to polish his Cheeveresque style.

4.4 Changes in Writing Location

Cheever changed his pattern of how he wrote when he moved his family to suburban Scarborough in 1951. Back in Manhattan, Cheever isolated himself. According to Susan Cheever, “He wrote in a windowless storage space in the basement of our apartment house. In the morning he put on his one suit, went down in the elevator with other men on their way to work, took off the suit, hung it up and wrote in his boxer shorts” (“Duet” 68).

At Scarborough, he was much more engaged with the world. As described by Susan Cheever:

One of the downstairs bedrooms was mine, and the other was, intermittently, my father’s workroom. He also worked upstairs in the master bedroom, down the hill in a rented office above the Scarborough railroad station, and in various borrowed rooms and offices in the neighborhood ... No one was ever particularly respectful of my father’s working hours, and he never had a strict writing schedule. He rarely seemed irritated when he was interrupted, and he was always ready to welcome a guest or answer the telephone or retrieve a lost hamster. (*Home* 100-101)

Writing in the environment that he was observing helped the Cheeveresque style to emerge. In his journal entries for 1952, he wrote long descriptions of people leaving and arriving at the train station where he wrote and contemplated “Mrs. Fuzzy-Wig” who he believed to be a non-conformist (8-9). These observations led to deeper reflections in his journal in 1953 and 1954. “How deeply buried in this community are the dramas of hardship and lust,” Cheever wrote in his journal in 1954 (36). “I think I can conclude that life, as it passes before our eyes, is a creative force—that one thing is put usefully upon another—that what we lose in one exchange is more than replenished by the next, that it is only us, only our pitiful misunderstandings that make for crookedness, darkness, and anger” (37).

The suburbs seemed to offer the perfect observation deck for his fiction as well, as Cheever concluded in a 1981 television interview that “there’s more vitality, more change, in the suburbs than you find in urban life” (Callaway 245).

The suburban location for his writing also allowed Cheever to get some exercise, playing with his dogs, swimming in neighboring pools and ponds, taking long walks in the woods, and working to clear his fields. The additional exercise beyond his walking in New York City no doubt contributed to greater mental agility in his writing.

4.5 Journal and Letter Writing

Cheever did a lot more writing in the 1950s than was visible simply through his published short stories and his first novel. Cheever was a prolific letter writer (ten to thirty a week) and kept a daily journal. The editors of the published volumes of his letters and journal entries both noticed how Cheever’s writing style in the early 1950s had improved from that of the 1940s.

Robert Gottlieb, editor of *The Journals of John Cheever*, remarked in an editor’s note that “earlier journals—from the forties, and some scanty passages from the Second World War—seemed considerably less consistent in their intensity and quality than what was to follow, and I had omitted them completely” (397).

Ben Cheever, editor of *The Letters of John Cheever*, while including letters from the 1940s, remarked in an editor's note:

The stories and the letters my father wrote improved as he went on. The early letters had wide margins and frequently ran to two pages, and sometimes even three or four. By 1950 the style was crisper, the margins narrower, and a letter rarely went more than three paragraphs. I am, however, reproducing some of the earlier and sometimes weaker correspondence at a greater length than quality demands, so that these letters can act as a foil to the better, later writing. (24-25)

Cheever said he used the journals to capture “a freshness of experience that one loses. And I can find it if I go back into the journals. It's the excitement of a smell or a sound or of meeting someone who strikes me as being accomplished and exciting” (Callaway 242).

Both his letter writing and his daily journal writing contributed to the development of the Cheeveresque style, as noted above and earlier by Meanor, as he contemplated more fully the activities of suburban life and fleshed them out in these writing venues before they became fodder for his published work. Meanor concluded that “the highly personal meditative content of the journals enabled Cheever to transform his earlier naturalistic style into what became uniquely Cheeveresque in his work from *The Enormous Radio* till the end of his career” (42).

More than meditative, though, the journaling was Cheever's test run or first draft of many of his story ideas, which improved with time once the ideas circulated from Cheever's mind to his fingers at the typewriter keyboard.

4.6 Teaching at Barnard

Cheever began a two-year stint as a creative writing instructor at Barnard College in the fall of 1954. Besides providing another underpinning to his financial security, the teaching job helped him to shape his Cheeveresque style by conducting regular writing workshops with his students. If the old adage “practice makes perfect” is a truism, Cheever's days as a writing instructor in the mid-1950s helped him test out his emerging style without the stress of having to produce actual text of his own.

One student in his class, whom biographer Donaldson tracked down, said that Cheever “was a demon for style” and “wowed his students by taking dull sentences and making them shine with a touch of incongruity here, a gorgeous clause there” (Donaldson 144). According to that student, Cheever was deep into how to “mythologize the commonplace” and on his way to being “the first of the magical realists” (Donaldson 144).

Cheever, who never loved teaching, once described his teaching approach as “no more than a conversation between an old writer and a young writer.” But he clearly took away some benefits for his own writing, not just giving instruction to his students, when he said, “And the old writer has a great deal to learn and, in many cases, so has the young writer. It seems to me mutually a very good arrangement” (Gioia, Dillon, and Stillman 67).

4.7 Liquor as Creative Juice

Cheever's alcoholism manifested itself more fully later in his life, during the 1960s and 1970s, when he entered the extensive literary dominion populated by the likes of William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway, award-winning novelists who were also alcoholics (Dardis 3).

Cheever expressed a belief that his drinking was responsible for his writing success in the early years. In a 1968 entry in *Journals*, he avowed that writing "has given me money and renown, but I suspect that it may have something to do with my drinking habits. The excitement of alcohol and the excitement of fantasy are very similar" (255). In a 1955 letter to Bill Maxwell, he wrote: "I am fine but not prolific. I never know how to cultivate these roses. I've been getting to bed early and walking to and from Ossining but on Wednesday I stayed up late, drank a pint of bourbon and worked like a streak on Thursday. I hope it has nothing to do with the degeneration of the tissues" (166).

One aspect of Cheever's drinking was particularly helpful in his writing during the 1950s—Virginia (Zinny) Schoales, a member of the Vanderslip family, who lived on another part of the Beechwood estate. According to Susan Cheever, Zinny "was my father's closest friend, confidante, and drinking companion for more than ten years" (*Home* 85). "My father walked or drove down to Zinny's almost every afternoon ... they drank and told each other stories. Zinny advised and recounted, my father invented and elaborated" (*Home* 87). Those discussions were the inspiration for numerous passages in *The Wapshot Chronicle*.

To get a sense of the importance of Zinny Schoales to Cheever's creative process during this period, one need only look to Cheever's dedication of *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill and Other Stories* to Zinny and her husband Dudley.

While excessive drinking normally impairs the senses, researcher Arnold Ludwig "found evidence that at least 16% of those persons who suffered from an emotional disorder showed an improvement in their creative activity at some point in their lives in response to a mental disturbance. This improvement involved greater productivity, overcoming writing blocks, the generation of new ideas, inspirations, or better performances" (166).

Ludwig specifically used Cheever as an example in *The Price of Greatness: Resolving the Creativity and Madness Controversy*: "For many more people, alcohol appeared to exert a beneficial effect by removing roadblocks or impediments to creativity, such as relieving severe depression—as was the case for John Cheever early in his career" (167).

Before liquor consumed Cheever in a long bout with alcoholism, it appears that his drinking in the 1950s stimulated his writing process rather than inhibited it.

5 CONCLUSION

Cheever seems to have never advanced a rationale for why his writing dramatically improved in the 1950s. He had a constitutional aversion to talking about why he wrote; for much of his career, he left the country when his books were published to avoid having to do interviews. It was only in the late 1970s when *Falconer* was published that Cheever consented to do interviews on an extensive basis. When he did offer thoughts on his writing, though, his comments were often shrouded in obfuscation.

Among the early explanations advanced by Cheever for why he wrote was this 1964 remark:

I know almost no greater pleasure than having a piece of fiction draw together disparate incidents so that they relate to one another and confirm that feeling that life itself is a creative process, that one thing is put purposefully upon another, that what is lost in one

encounter is replenished in the next, and that we possess some power to make sense of what takes place. (“Ovid” 72)

Fifteen years later, Cheever observed in 1979:

Confinement has been one of the principal themes of my work, whether in a small New England village, a prison—or one’s own passions. I’ve often found my self confined by my intellectual and physical limitations. But I believe that discovering the liberties one can enjoy within the confinements of one’s own mortality is basically the nature of life on this planet. (Cheever, “Fiction” 92)

While neither of these statements firmly advances the “why” behind the genesis of the Cheeveresque style in the 1950s, the statements do illuminate how the meaning of Cheeveresque refined over the decade of the 1950s. Cheeveresque transformed from a juxtaposition of the superficial and hidden aspects of life in suburbia in the early 1950s into a commentary on confinement in life during the latter stages of the 1950s. Such was the power of the seven underlying influences to the development of the Cheeveresque style: father-like figures, gaining financial security, changes in fiction at the *New Yorker*, changes in writing location, journal and letter writing, teaching at Barnard College, and consumption of liquor as a creative juice.

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