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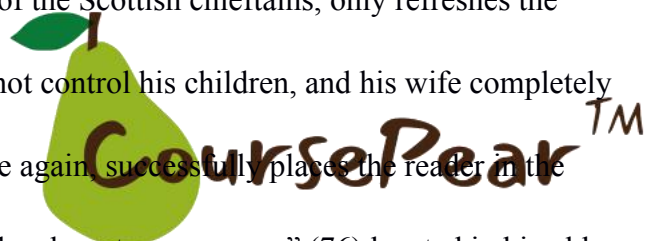
Course

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A Desperate Old Man

In the worst of battles, when there is no longer a reason to fight and no righteous cause for dying, even the bravest of troops are faced with the dishonorable thought of desertion. In a similar conflict John Cheever's short story "The Country Husband" portrays Francis Weed as the protagonist who is presented with the notion of deserting his family with hopes of getting the attention he is desperately in need of from a young school girl named Ann Murchison. Does that make Francis a "dirty old man"? Well, with the use of historical war references and parallel structure John Cheever provides the reader with a better understanding of why Francis fantasizes about having an affair with Ann and the trauma residing in Francis Weed's memory from his experiences in the war by constantly battling his family, society, and himself.

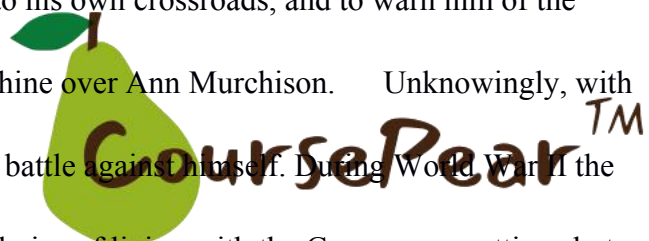
The futile battle against Francis Weed's family is best described by a "simple announcement [which], like the war cries of the Scottish chieftains, only refreshes the ferocity of the combatants" (76).¹ He cannot control his children, and his wife completely ignores his cry for attention. Cheever, once again, successfully places the reader in the battlefield when Francis is dispatched to "headquarters company" (76) located in his older daughter's room. Helen effortlessly maneuvers around Francis Weed's roadblock on the "True Romance" (76) magazine. The reader might get a sense that Francis has not left the



war because everything around him, subconsciously, becomes a memory of the war. Cheever is quick to point out the image of “the spreading wings of The Angel of Death” (74) indicating that perhaps throughout Francis Weed’s post war life he is followed by this image, yet he cannot release the image out of his life because no one seems to care about what he feels.

Cheever immediately connects the Angel of Death with “the Allied troops in World War II” (74). He makes it easier for the reader to understand how the troops, including Francis, stationed in Europe during World War II could have frequent visits by the all-too-familiar angel. Shortly thereafter, Cheever makes a reference to “the Marne” (74), he suggests that there are forces consolidating to stop Francis Weed from conquering Shady Hill, and jeopardizing the validity of its collective moral standard. With Cheever’s use of a parallel structure one can compare the “public chastisement of a young woman who had lived with [a] German commander” (78) and the possible consequences Francis Weed can encounter if he chooses the path not favored by the judgmental occupiers of Shady Hill.

Ironically, the same young woman who finds herself nude and bald towards the end of the war in the “crossroads [under] a very discouraging light” (78) reappears directly in front of Francis as if to warn him of his arrival to his own crossroads, and to warn him of the deceiving yet encouraging light that will shine over Ann Murchison. Unknowingly, with the appearance of Ann, Francis begins the battle against himself. During World War II the young woman was most likely given the choice of living with the Germans or getting shot on the spot. In a similar perspective, Francis has the choice of surrendering his soul to the enemy and living like a ghost floating aimlessly surrounded by zombies who pay no attention to the



dead, or getting socially blasted for choosing to follow his heart and living—however much that entails being a deserter. Ultimately, Francis ends up being overrun by his enemies, and John Cheever puts an end to his war by stating that “it is a night where Kings in golden suits ride elephants over the mountains” (91). This suggests that Cheever is comparing Francis to Hannibal and his feat over the Romans. If so, it may be that Francis has won the battle against himself by admitting his desires to the psychiatrist and succumbing to the peaceful art of woodwork in the discouraging light of his basement. However, like Hannibal, Francis loses the war, and Jupiter continues to be the neighborhood king.

John Cheever effectively creates a battlefield in Francis Weed’s mind so the reader of “A Country Husband” can understand the possible effects of traumatic experiences that war veterans may encounter. Therefore, in the battle against Francis Weed’s family, society, and himself, John Cheever incorporates war imagery and parallel structure to deter the reader from thinking of Francis as a “dirty old man”. Instead, Cheever portrays Francis to being a character with a desperate plea for attention fighting primarily with himself with hopes of retaining his honor. While Francis Weed’s honor is compromised, he decides not to desert, and remains guarding his lonely post in Shady Hill even when the war is lost.



Note

1The text used in this study is taken from The Norton Introduction to Literature, 9th ed. Ed. Booth, et.al. (New York: Norton, 2005): 74-91. All quotations are from this text and are cited internally by page number.

