

# **“We’re happy, aren’t we?”: Self-Deception in Literature and Life in John Cheever’s “The Enormous Radio”**

~Miguel Rivera, September 2014

To what extent is self-deception justified? Is it a necessary evil in one’s daily life, to function and proceed through it, however hopeless it may be? Is said mechanism restricted to a certain social class? These are some of the driving questions behind John Cheever’s “The Enormous Radio,” (1947). In the story, Jim and Irene Westcott come into possession of a luxurious radio which plays, not the “serious music” from which they derive enjoyment, but the conflict, discord, and intimate moments of other tenants in their apartment building. Initially, Jim and Irene share in the joy of voyeurism as they spy and laugh on their neighbors. That fun, however, quickly turns to terror as Irene is exposed to arguments over impending financial ruin, plans to exploit friends, and even domestic abuse. Jim instructs Irene to cease her listening, but she is unwilling or unable to do so and brings to the surface the issues within her own marriage.

Early on in the story, Jim is described as being “intentionally naive” which establishes the theme of self-deception. Further on, the reader and Irene are exposed to inter-marital deceptions (allegedly in the interest of the partner) and plots to sell the lost belongings of ostensible friends through the radio. Hearing these events transpire, Irene asks questions about her marriage that she is not prepared to have answered. At the story’s midpoint, she pressed a distressed Jim on the condition of their marriage. She prods him, saying “Life is too terrible, too sordid and awful. But we’ve never been like that, have we, darling?” She continues posing these questions that Jim is not prepared to

answer in the negative. Rather, he states “tiredly” that they indeed are different from their fellow tenants and happy. Cheever writes that Jim’s reassurances come from him “surrendering his resentment.”

The reader, of course, knows that the issues that face the other families in the apartment building are not unique. Jim and Irene are as broken (or, as functional, if you’re an optimist) couple as any. Their conflict come to a head in the wake of Jim’s resigned reassurances in a shouting match about money and overdue bills. Irene offers her apologies for lying about a clothing bill, citing her desire not to worry her husband. This type of “white lie” characterizes the self-deception that Cheever show deftly depicts in the story. For Irene’s part, it is not simply a lie to her husband but a subjugation of her own concern. To protect her husband from worry also protects herself, as she alone is the custodian of the knowledge that there are bills to be paid. As any middle class family with a balance on their credit card knows, one can be propelled forward by the axiom that “things will work themselves out” in regards to meeting the terms of this debt. Such a platitude is unconsciously deployed despite a complete lack of a financial plan to repay said debt. This is a fairly myopic example of the greater point, that middle class life filled with unachievable hopes and aspirations thrives on the self-deception that what one desires will come to them.

It is difficult to discern if Cheever is taking a position on this issue or merely depicting its occurrence. Jim and Irene could be positioned as opposing ideological views in regards to perpetuating middle class self-deception and exposing “life as it is,” respectively. However, it is tough to cast the passive Irene in this roll — although relative to Jim she’s an absolute radical. Irene seems to have difficulty grappling with the reality of the situation similarly to Jim, but she has a greater interest in seeing the reality of her situation exposed. However, it seems clear that the questions she asks are not meant to expose but rather to perpetuate the illusion through Jim’s affirmation. Because of Jim’s trepidation in responding and subsequent explosion, the reader sees the parity between Jim’s existential status and Irene’s. They are both seeking to perpetuate their self-deception but Irene has simply been made unable to do so. This reading lends itself to a certain extent to the analysis of “The Enormous Radio” that suggests it is a retelling of the Adam and Eve myth, but the interesting subversion of that myth in the new setting

is the “sin” has already occurred. Jim and Irene, through self-deception, are attempting to inoculate themselves to the already fallen world.

In the final portion of the story, during Jim and Irene’s argument, Jim refers to her as “Christly” and “a convent girl.” He accuses Irene of hypocrisy because she herself stole jewelry from her mother, retained money intended for her sister, and had an abortion. These two turns point to the Adam and Eve allegory and the financial uncertainty of middle class life. Here, it is Jim who is attempting to rip away the veneer of morality that Irene has perpetuated by setting herself apart from her friends and peers after being exposed to their private life. Irene casts harsh judgment on those former friends and ceases to behave civilly toward them. In this sense, both Jim and Irene are shown to be engaging in serious self-deception which enables them to continue as a couple and as individuals. What Cheever captures so authentically is the way that human beings generally have a tendency to explain away perceived lapses in moral judgment. However, as Jim and Irene’s relationship and individual interiority begins to collapse, a reader is left to wonder whether one is better off not gazing too deeply into the lives of others. That comprehension can lead to uncomfortable recognitions about the nature of one’s own life.

The last question, departing from the text a bit, is what literature’s roll is when it comes to the perpetuation of these illusions. Middle class life is certainly not as difficult as other living conditions, but Cheever’s assessment is noticeably devoid of any positive consequences to the removal of said illusions. Cheever takes it upon himself to construct a believable reality and make the reader a voyeur in the same way Irene looks in on the life of her neighbors. Readers examine Irene’s life and may come to an uncomfortable realization about one’s own life. Though Cheever does not give readers a compelling benefit within the story to motivate the outward (and subsequently, inward) examination that brings one to a greater realization of “life as it is.” However, literature itself seems to be the voyeuristic examination of potential lives for the purpose of self-examination. Perhaps, then, Cheever takes issue with the function of literature as a medium. Or perhaps, more conventionally, he is simply indicting the petite bourgeoisie. Unquestionably, Cheever’s story is one of a group of people who attempt to live outside of their means and then must contrive an internal justification, through self-deception, to facilitate their life style. To face life as it is would be to

expose one's self to something "too sordid and awful" for the delicate constitution of the middle class.