Chapter 6
"IN PURSUIT OF PARADISE" - A STUDY OF OH WHAT A PARADISE IT SEEMS

To move away from the dark, tense, and suffocating atmosphere of Falconer and to enter the comparatively bright, relaxed, and airy atmosphere of Oh What a Paradise It Seems (hereafter abbreviated as What a Paradise for convenience), should come as a welcome relief to the reader. This novel of cheever's, his last and shortest, strikes out in a different direction from Falconer. Metaphorically speaking, it is as if the novelist having touched the depths of hell and gone through purgatorial trial in Falconer, now rises and moves towards paradise, seeking and image, a reflection of it, in the planet on which we all live. He knows only too well that man and the world, which he contemplates imaginatively as a writer, are both fallen and falling. And his instinctive belief in the purity and glory of creation, as a believing Christian, has also given him an inevitable sensitiveness to its corruption since the Fall. If so, would not seeking to glimpse paradise - the paradise before it was "lost" - seem a mere indulgence in an impossible dream, a yielding to an escapist nostalgia, a futile longing for something which has been irretrievably lost for ever? But cheever takes a positive rather than a negative view of nostalgia, as is clear from his replies to his interviewers' questions.

Cheever told John Hersey explicidy what nostalgia meant to him. Although his explanation has already been cited in the introductory chapter, it bears repetition "- - - Nostalgia is also a passion, a longing not only for that which is lost to us, or which has been destroyed or burned, or which we've outgrown; it is also a force of aspiration. It is finding ourselves not in the world we love but knowing how deeply we love it, enjoying some conviction that we will
return, or discover it, or discover the way to it". (Emphasis added). Such a confident view
of nostalgia is possible because of his faith in the potentialities in man and the world for
transcendence. Therefore he regarded it a privilege to be alive on this planet. There is an
interesting entry in his *Journal* made sometime in 1981 when he was going through his last fatal
illness. This entry is made while referring to Verdi (1813 - 1901) the Italian composer:

I think of the enormous contribution Verdi made to the life of the
planet and the enormous co-operation he was given by orchestras
and singers and the enthusiasm of audiences. And I think what an
enormous opportunity it is to be alive on this planet. Having
myself been cold and hungry and terribly alone, I think I still feel
the excitement of an opportunity. The sense of being with some
sleeping person - one's child or one's love - and seeming to taste
the privilege of living, or being alive. This sense of privilege or
opportunity seems to hint, and no more than hint, as other worlds
around us.

*What a Paradise* was in progress when the above jotting in the *Journal* was made, and it may
serve as an indirect gloss on the novel. Cheever is not a nature writer but the exhilarating power
of the natural world is strong in his novels; Many of his protagonists experience it, and share
his love of water, light, and the blue sky and also human love. These aspects of nature figure
in his work "as an essence palpable, as a manifestation of the natural good that bubbles and
pours and glints around us", as John Updike notes in his review of *What a Paradise*. Cheever
told one of his interviewers that light was of the greatest importance to him and that he
associated the light of the sky "with virtue or with hopefulness". He seem to have sought and
found clues to the supernatural in aspects of nature. The simple phenomenon of light falling
through the leaves of trees strikes Farrgut of *Falconer* as "a transcendent piece of good news".
If Farragut is regarded as exceptional because he is a widely read academic professor, such characters as Leander Wapshot and his son Coverly in *The Wapshot Chronicle*, who are of the ordinary and average, also find reminders of Paradise in the world of nature. Leander, who is keenly aware of the abundance of natural beauty in and around St. Botolphs, celebrates the sensation roused in him in his journal. At such moments the earth seems paradisiacal to him. When Honora threatens to sell his boat he is thrown into a turmoil. At that time, as he looks out of the window, "he could see the blue sky above the trees - - - and he was easily charmed with the appearance of the world. How could anything go wrong in such a paradise?" Coverly and his wife Betsey walk hand in hand to the sea, swim to their hearts' content, and lie down on the beach feeling exalted with love. Then "a searing vision of some golden age" blooms in Coverly's mind. There is the suggestion implied that they remind one of Adam and Eve before the fall.

It may be said that *What a Paradise* is an attempt to express in terms of fiction the "aspiration", the "love" and the "privilege" that Cheever has spoken of. But it does not all mean that the novel is to be read in terms of his life. It is pure fiction when the novel appeared it seems to have received unanimous critical acclaim from the reviewers. The one question on which opinion differed was about the label to be affixed to it: whether it is a novel or a novella, a long story, a poetic narrative, a parable etc., because its bulk is so small. Cheever himself called it an "ecological romance", the "first" of its kind. Reviewers have marvelled to Cheever's ability to part into the short span of a hundred pages such diverse issues as to make the reader feel that this short piece of fiction reads like a big novel. He has brought into it, as Updike
ites, such "matter as unexpected as Balkan villages, the archaeology of fortresses and market
aces, the paleontology of the ice skate, the democratization of Freudian parlance, the
xiuity and the ubiquity of fried food, the possibility of a world wherein even the tenderest
entions will be communicated by means of signal lights on automobiles and the decline of
ues and caste sense". These are " briskly interposed - - - without hindering the flow of this
umbling, purling little narrative".

Of the several labels suggested, Cheever's 'ecological romance' comes closest to the spirit
of What a Paradise and may be preferred to the other as George Hunt suggests. It is convenient
to use this label. It is mainly concerned with ecology; with protecting on 'eikos' our
environment against a number of odds and formidable forces from being corrupted and polluted.
The problem as is well known, has acquired a global urgency, such being the pervasiveness of
the menace and the threat it poses to human kind. For cheever, as it should be obvious, it is
of paramount importance to safeguard man's geographical, social and political environment as
well as his spiritual environment or spiritual home which is even more threatened and
angered more than even before. And hence his choice of a suggestive title for this short
ovel. The effort to save the environment involves a collision with forces which are
scrupulous and formidable, and therefore requires a determination to fight, heroism and valour
a sense of duty and spirit of sacrifice. Incidentally it has also the thrill of adventure. Romantic
tables of knight-errantry have all these characteristics. What a Paradise differs from a traditional
romance in that those who undertake the heroic adventure are of the ordinary and average with
exceptional abilities, though prompted by a sense of purpose and a spirit of sacrifice. Of
course, there is no damsel in distress here for a knight-errant. The nymph-like damsel who appears for a while and vanishes on her own remains elusive.

What a Paradise tells a simple and unpretentious story in a straight forward fashion. The main action traces the rapid alteration of Beasley's Pond, a beautiful and deep body of water, a piece of untroubled nature and a splendid skating spot, into a dump for rubbish and toxic wastes and its restoration to its former paradiesical condition. The pond, strictly speaking is the central character and the centre of emotional concern, and "becomes the occasion for a host of excursions and digressions" that inch into this fable.10 The plot is quite simple and can be briefly outlined. Lemuel Sears, a man of means who lives in New York and works for a firm which manufactures intrusion systems for computer containers, and who is old but not yet infirm, goes for the weekend to Beasley's Pond at the north end of the town of Janice, to skate and derives immense delight from the experience. But when he returns to the pond sometime later he is appalled to find it rezoned as a dump site preparatory to build a war memorial. The lawyer whom Sears hires to investigate the matter is ominously killed. Then he seeks Horace Chisholm, an ardent environmentalist to pursue the matter. Gradually Sears and Chisholm learn that the town council of Janice colluding with organised crime, is actually using the pond as a dump site for financial gain. Nevertheless they continue their efforts to save the pond.

Meanwhile, Sears is engaged in the pursuit of another kind of restoration which runs parallel to his interest in the pond. This signifies a second strand of events in the novel. Though old, Sears retains the erotic susceptibility of young man. He falls desperately in love
with Renee Herndon an attractive and youngish divorcee of pronounced sensuality. This mysterious and capricious woman leaves Sears abruptly without warning subjecting him to "the Balkans of the spirit". Finding himself at an emotional dead end he devotes himself to the salvaging of Beasley's Pond, actively assisted by Chisholm, but Chisholm too gets killed. The near-lethal act of poisoning the teriyaki Sauce in the local supermarket as a warning by Betsy Logan, a house-wife, convinces the authorities to stop polluting the pond. The pond is saved and the story ends happily.

This outline of the plot does not reveal the other dimensions of the novel which makes it meaningful. The title, "Oh What a Paradise It Seems", is richly suggestive and provides a clue to the ultimate meaning of the novel. It "challenges us", an George Hunt says, "to remember the twin paradises, the one lost and the other sought, the one revealed to us in memory and nostalgia and the other in aspiration and hope". "Salvage and salvation are at the heart of the story".

The novel open with a lyrical passage reminiscent of a fairy tale as if it is a story of long ago.

This is a story to be read in bed in an old house on a rainy night. The dogs are asleep and the saddle horses - - - can be heard in their stalls across the dirt road beyond the orchard. The rain is gentle - - -. The water tables are equitable, the nearby river is plentiful, the garden and orchards - - - are irrigated ideally - - -.

No dates are mentioned and the time of the action of the plot is indefinite, and the narrator's refrain, "At the time of which I am writing" emphasises it. Further, while Janice, village near
which Beasley's Pond is located and the pond itself are concretely presented, their exact location is not clarified. The tone adopted by the narrator induces a tranquil mood. All these are designed to distance the narrative from the immediate present to a vantage point so that it may be contemplated by itself by the reader. This device does not in anyway lessen its immediate relevance. On the contrary it suggests that after times too would find it relevant since the issue at the heart of the novel concerns the whole of mankind. The mention of computers, unidentified flying objects, fast food franchises, and homes for the comatose and the dying suggests that the reader is not taken to a too far away time in the future, although the narrator's voice seems to come as if from sometime in the distant future.

Once the vantage point is fixed the pond is introduced: "At the north end of the town was Beasley's Pond - a deep body of water, shaped like a bent arm, with heavily forested shores". And next Lemuel Sears, the protagonist (at the level of action) is introduced. As in the case of Ezekiel Farragut, Cheever gives Sears too a suggestive name: 'Lemuel', from Hebrew, means 'pledged' or 'consecrated to God'. He is an old man but not yet infirm, although soon than later he has to face the facts of his age. That he remembers the time "when the horizons of his country were dominated by the beautiful and lachrymose wine-glass elm tree", and also "the promise of dirigible travel" is an indication of his age. Exhilarated by the sight of a cardinal bird with deep red plumage, he decides early in January to go skating on Beasley's Pond. The fleetness he feels on skates seems to have for him "the depth of an ancient experience", influenced as he was by the ideas of the paleontologist Alan Gardner. Further, the "pleasure of fleetness" seem "divine" to him. 'Swinging down a long stretch of black ice"
gives him "a sense of homecoming", and the conviction that at the end of a long journey, he is "on his way home", where his name is known and loved, and lamps burn in rooms and fires blaze in the hearth. But for him as well as many of the skaters "home night be an empty room and an empty bed". Cheever leaves it to the reader to ask the question where is this "home" then, if it is not to be an "illusion", that they all look forward to returning. Perhaps it is hinted by "Paradise" in the title of the novel which is the true home, the 'eikos', of all creatures. Sears comes again the next Sunday to find many more skating on the ice with complete absorption.

When Sears returns a few weeks later to Beasley's Pond he is rudely shocked to find that the ice it has melted to reveal that it is being used for dump and nearly one third of it has already been spoiled. He sees in it "the discharge of a society inclined to nomadism". Possibly there is a suggestion here that man has been a nomad, a wanderer since the Fall. For him it is "an absolute disaster with a power of melancholy" to see "souvenirs of early love", token of affection meant to celebrate erotic mysteries - electric to toasters vacuum cleaners and the like-lying "spread-eagled rusted, and upended by the force with which they mere cast off". This off hand reflection of Sears's hints at the transition in the next chapter in which he takes up with Renee Herndon. Whatever spiritual comfort he had received by skating is now rudely obliterated. Soon after returning to New York he sets his lawyer to investigate the tragedy of Beasley's Pond.

Sears's spirits, however, revive by the sight of Renee Herndon a remarkably good-looking woman at a bank. He is at that stage in his life when he has to face the facts of his age,
even though he might boast of his strength and agility of movement, and perhaps realise that sooner than later he will have to leave the country of love to which is the proper domain of the young: "Her figure was splendid and endearing. He thought that perhaps it was nostalgia that made her countenance such a forceful experience for him. It could have been that he was growing old and feared the end of love. The possibility of such a loss very much on his mind". In her face he seems to see "very definitely a declaration of paradise". Under the pretext of asking her what the music is that is playing over the loudspeakers in the bank, he makes the acquaintance of Renee. It marks the beginning of an intensely erotic but short-lived relationship.

Sears's affair with Renee occupies a considerable part of the novel. The whole of chapter 2, part of chapter 4, and chapters 5, 7, and 8 are concerned with it. In getting involved with her he begins to pursue another kind of restoration after the disappointment at Beasley's Pond. His romance with this capricious, mysterious, wanton nymph-like woman with its ups and downs, runs parallel with his battle on behalf of the pond. For a time the pond even gets relegated into the background of his mind. Renee remains an elusive and enigmatic character. Sears fails the understand her, although he derives immense pleasure in her company looks forward to it, and even enjoys waiting for her for hours together at places such as parish houses and church basements which he may not hare cared to visit on his own. There is something comically grotesque about a man of his age seeking a woman who does not hesitate to tantalise him now and then. Her standard conversational gambit", Robet Adam remarks, "is 'you don't understand the first thing about women'; and about this woman it's certainly true Sears doesn't
understand her, she makes no effort to explain herself, so the reader does not understand her either.\footnote{20}

One wonders whether Renée knows her own mind. Her activities are incongruous. She goes to a Presbyterian church on Thursdays to attend abstinence meetings to the New School for Social Research on Fridays to take a course in accounting, and to a Baptist Church on Mondays although it is doubtful whether religion interests her at all. Why she attends these church meetings she refuses to tell Sears. A middle aged mother of two grown up children, a divorcée she has perhaps her own problems as well as her sensuality she has to come to terms with. A vacancy seems to surround her. Having taken Sears up she gratifies as well as disappoints him capriciously. On an occasion, she asks him to come to her flat for lunch. But when he reaches her door full of anticipation, he finds her all dressed to go out for lunch. He goes out to bring some flowers for her. When he returns he finds her already gone away. On yet another occasion she asks him to go over for a drink, when he goes there she is dressed for travel. She says that she is going to see her daughter, and she leaves him abruptly. She never returns, learning old Sears disappointed and confused. The "Paradise" he thought he saw on her face also vanishes with her. In his confusion he seeks consolation in a homosexual relationship, though temporary with Eduardo the elevator operator of Renee’s flat. He even consults a psychiatrist, who, as may be expected gives him little help.

Renee may remind one of Marcia, Farragut’s wife in Falconer. But of course she is not a spiteful woman like the other. It is rather surprising and puzzling too that in the world of
Cheever's fiction, there is hardly a female character whose portrayal can be accepted without reservations, the possible exception being the eccentric Honora Wapshot. Cheever's attitude to self-reliant working women seems always ambiguous. However, both Marcia in Falconer and Renee in What a Paradise fulfil the roles assigned to them in the respective novels.

While Sear's is busy enjoying the thrill of following Renee to different places, he receives news that the lawyer whom he had appointed to investigate the pollution of Beasley's Pond is murdered, and that before he was eliminated he had ascertained that "the Janice Planning Board had rezoned the pond for 'fill' and given the property a tax-exempt status as a future war memorial". To pursue the matter further, the lawyer had suggested he could seek the help of Horace Chisholm, an environmentalist. With Renee's going away, Sears devotes himself to the salvaging of the pond. Although her going away is a great blow to him he feels regenerated by having known her. She reinstates him in the country of love, and renews in him a sense of national potency and linkage with the human race. Chapter 3, part of chapter 4, chapter 6, and chapters from 9 onwards till the end of the novel are all concerned with the affairs of the pond and the efforts made to save it. It is as if by these efforts Sears is restoring his ties with Mother earth. As Joshua Gilder observers, "The purification of Beasleys' Pond becomes more than a metaphor; it's almost the means of Sears's spiritual purification".

Chapter 3 introduces the episode of the Italian barber Sammy Salazzo and his wife Maria which is both comic and poignant. Plagued by bills and the lack of customers, when he comes home for supper, Sammy is told by his wife that "there's nothing to eat in the house but dog
food". The irate husband shoots dead Buster, his pet dog. This is witnessed by their neighbour Betsy Logan, who is none too friendly with the Salazzos. She is shocked by the murder of the dog which was friendly with her. She now feels only hatred and contempt for her neighbours. She is going to play an important part in saving Beasley's Pond, though neither she nor anyone else has any idea of it. Disconsolate at her husband's desperation Maria seeks the help of Uncle Luigi, who sets him up as the collector of money for the dumping of fill in Beasley's Pond. Virtually, as subsequent events show, he is appointed, as it were, to supervise the death of Beasley's Pond". That is the justification for bringing in this episode which at first sight seem a digression, and unrelated to the main narrative.

In the latter half of the next chapter the want of friendliness between the salazzos and Betsy Logan is dwelt on once again. Betsy's dislike of her neighbours is aggravated by their murder of their dog Buster who was very friendly towards Betsy and her two children. The salazzos fixing wind chimes in their back porch, gives her another reason to dislike them further. Actually the wind chimes seem "to speak to her", she cannot "discern what she found so troubling in the noise they make but she thought they made a troublesome noise". She disliked the salazzos and everything about them because they had killed their dog. On the suggestion of her husband Henry, she puts it politely to Maria to turn the chimes off, for which she gets the rebuffing reply: You must be going crazy. You think I can turn off the wind'? This episode, instead of ending their mutual dislike, adds fuel to it. When they chance to meet next at the Buy Brite supermarket a regular fight ensures between them. A dispute arises between Maria Salazzo, who has begun to feel the power of new affluence, on one hand and Betsy and other
shoppers at Buy Brite about the proper deportment in taking the express lane. What begin as a verbal exchange between Maria and Betsy soon leads to an exchange of blows which is described with a touch of the mock-heroic:

Betsy, in an overwhelming paroxysm of anger, seized Maria's cart and, drawing it toward her, tipped all the groceries onto the floor. Maria, quite as overwhelmed, and passionate as if she felt herself to be a figure in some ancient patriotic or religious contest, came at Betsy, swinging. Their raised voices, the screaming, drew a crowd, and perhaps a hundred shoppers, with their carts, gathered to match these women fighting over groceries and precedents.26

With considerable effort they are parted and made to go their separate ways.

This comic interlude is necessary because Betsy's husband Henry realises that she, especially after the fracas at Buy Brite takes her and the children to Chelmsford Beach. On their way back they inadvertently leave their baby boy. Binxie on the roadside, who is by a lucky chance picked up by the environmentalist Chisholm and restored to them. Thus unexpectedly Betsy gets herself involved in the saving of Beasley's Pond. Chapter Nine is all about the Logan's visit to the beach and the rescue and restoration of their apparently lost child by Chisholm and his earnest appeal to her to do whatever she can to save Beasley's Pond.

It is on a lovely summer's day that the logans go to Chelmsford Beach. Betsy, like most Cheever characters, is exhilarated by the sea and the sky: "Her people were not fishermen or sailors and she had nothing at all to do with the sea so far as she knew, but the brine and blue
Betsy's vague sense of loss becomes specific and particular when she discovers that they must have left little Binxie accidentally on the side of the highway. Fortunately for them Horace Chisholm, who happens to be driving in the same direction, notices the baby in the baby carrier and is only too glad to restore Binxie to his parents. Chisholm is her counterpart. He was only briefly mentioned as an environmentalist in an earlier chapter. He is seen for the first time now. As George Hunt Points out, "Chisholm provides an excellent example of the way in which Cheever is able to create a subordinate character in a few pages who can elicit our sympathy and interest and also personify the dramatic and thematic collisons in the story". It may be pointed out at this stage itself that in truth it is Chisholm who is the true sacrificing knight of this 'ecological romance'. A truly conscientious man, he lives alone because his wife with their two...
daughters has left him as she finds him "immobile". The narrator justly remarks: "it was he who had been ousted but it was she who made the spiritual departure. He is a high school teacher of Biochemistry who "had come to feel that the hazards to the environment around him summoned him imperatively to do what he could to correct this threat to life on the planet or at least to inform the potential victims". To do his bit to save the environment becomes his vocation.

On this particular afternoon, Chisholm happens to be returning a town planning board meeting in which it was decided, to his dismay, to effect a zoning change which would involve paving a half square mile for a shopping centre while poisoning and corrupting some wetlands that in turn fed sources of drinking water. The community voted for it because the damage would be felt not immediately but a decade or more later when they would all be living elsewhere. This turn of thought which betrays "the diminised responsibilities of our society-its wanderings, its dependence on acceleration, its parasitic nature" deeply troubles Chisholm. At such display of venality he feels depressed as well as lost. Divorced, lonely and isolated, he has no home to return to, and no neighbourhood either which has become anonymous and therefore no waiter a shopkeeper or bartender to greet him. This situation is enough to shatter an individual completely, and fill him with self-destructive despair.

However, Chisholm makes an effort to take a positive and hopeful view of himself: " He seemed to be searching for the memory of some place, some evidence of the fact that he had once been able to put himself into a supremely creative touch with his world and his kind. He
longed for this as if it were some country which he had been forced to leave”. He is, to fight his sense of loneliness, eager to establish communication with others, passers-by and strangers though they might be, by means of parking lights and signals”. “In a lonely fantasy of nomadism he imagined a world where men and women communicated with one another mostly by signal lights and where he proposed marriage to some stranger because she turned on her parking lights an hour before dusk, disclosing a supple and romantic nature”. Chisholm is struggling to grapple with a spiritual crisis, a spiritual deprivation, characterised by his sense of loneliness and isolation: “His physical reality and the reality of the car he was driving were unassailable, but his spiritual reality seem to be vanishing in a way that he had never before experienced. - - - He seemed to have been hurled bodily from the sanctuary of some church, although he had never committed himself to anything that could be called serious prayer”.}

It is this psychological moment of Chisholm’s experiencing acutely a sense of loss and displacement, he makes the marvellous discovery of the baby in the blue baby carrier by the side of the road. This comes as a surprise, a chance occurrence, but not improbable. Yielding to a nostalgic desire for wild blackberries, of which his mother was very fond, and which symbolise for him innocence and youthful home, he looks for them, and finds a place on the road shoulder commodious enough for him to stop and park his car safely. Then he sees the baby carrier. It is its brightness and bluness, both images of light and the ethereal sky, that hold his attention. When he finds a clean, happy baby waving its hands, rather than some wrapping paper or an abandoned piece of clothing, he exclaims: “You must be Moses, you must be King of the Jews.” The daughter of Pharaoh had found unexpectedly baby Moses placed in an ark and
abandoned in the reeds by the river bank. George Hunt has seen further relevance in this exclamation. He says that the "discovery of the baby effects a spiritual exodus for him (is Chisholm), leading him forth from social isolation and egocentric enslavement:.*

Chisholm takes the baby in the bassinet to the nearer police station. He is "terribly happy" that he is returning the infant to its mother. For immediately on seeing the abandoned child he had imagined how its young mother must have been suffering because of the cruelly enforced separation and deprivation. He rejoices at the police station to see the baby and its father reunited. Henry invites him out of gratitude for dinner the next night. Chisholm realises that "continuity had seemed to be what he sought that afternoon when he had felt so painfully lost".* At the end of the next evening after dinner, Chisholm before taking leave of the Logans tells Betsy, "Do whatever you can to save Beasley's Pond". He has been able to recover now the sense of continuity he had lost, in the shared human responsibility for the restoration of the pond. The restoration of Binxie to his parents may be viewed as a happy augury for the efforts to purify the pond. But as subsequent events show, it is not achieved as smooth as one would have wished.

In chapter ten, the penultimate chapter, the issue concerning Beasley's Pond reaches its climax, the town board in its meeting, based by money power, deciding against its restoration, seemingly with the tacit support of the majority present at the rigged meeting. Sears and Chisholm who have opposed it are just two against too many. Before going to the meeting these two spend the afternoon making an extensive survey of the wetlands around Beasley's Pond,
struggling through the marshes. Chisholm recites to Sears in a Litany fashion all the poisons that the laboratory to which samples of water have been sent for analysis, has promised to find. Sears is dismayed by what he sees: "Where the water was clear one saw trails of vileness like the paraphernalia of witchcraft", something diabolical and corrupt. But the stream itself which to his eyes has the appearance of "a traditional trout brook" rouses in his mind a different vision with deep religious implications:

The illusion of eternal purity the stream possessed, its music and the greenery of its banks, reminded Sears of pictures he had seen of paradise. The sacred grove was no legitimate part of his thinking, but the whiteness of falling water, the variety of its sounds, the serenity of the pools he saw corresponded to a memory as deep as any he possessed. He had on his knees in countless cavernous and ill-ventillated Episcopal churches praised the beginnings of things. He had heard this described in Revelation as a sea of crystal and living creatures filled with eyes, but it seemed that he had never believed it to be anything but a fountain head.38

Sears, who is no longer obsessed with Renee, has begun to move gradually away from his ignorance towards an "insight into the mystery of the first creation". It is "not a sentimental homesickness" natural to an ageing man but a "nostalgia for the source of one's very existence that predates that corruption sin brings - - - " which "diminishes" both memory and hope".39

To Sears a trout stream in a forest, or a traverse of potable water seems baptismal, spiritually purifying. It seems to be "the bridge that spans the mysterious abyss between our spiritual and our carnal selves". In view of this "his panic about his own contamination" seems
"contemptible". The voice of the brook too sounds baptismal to him, and reminder of his nativity: "When he was young, brooks had seemed to speak to him in the tongues of men and angels. Now that he was an old man - - - the sound of matter seemed to be the language of his nativity, some tongue he had spoken before his birth".40

In contrast to this language of the running brook Sears has to listen to and put up with the languages of corruption as well as the corruption of language at the meeting of the town board, held at the Janice townhall. The Hallway is filled with tobacco smoke adding to the ominousness of the atmosphere. This fraudulently controlled meeting is deliberately arranged to take place just a few hours before the "hold order" obtained by Chisholm restraining the "enemies" from dumping waste into Beasley's Pond, expires. Sears rightly sizes up the mayor, who conducts the meeting, as "one of those liars who speak quite directly when they are truthful but who address their falsehoods to the fingernails of their left hands".41 Most of the time he addresses his fingernails only. In his address the mayor skillfully combined popular political prejudices, patriotic sentiments, platitudes and cliches to appeal to his listeners, all the while distorting truth.

Without mentioning the name of Chisholm he insinuates that he is a "communist-inspired conservationist whose bread is buttered by an old man", thus gratifying popular political prejudice. Appealing to popular sentiment and patriotism he justifies the acquisition of the pond for "the sole purpose of building a monument to the forgotten dead", "to commemorate the sacrifice of life made by their beloved sons and husbands in the cause of freedom".42 As one
more instance of the mayor's corruption and his corruption of language the following deceptive and platitudinous cliche-ridden extract from his speech may be cited:

Beasley's Pond is like the mainstream of American thought. It accords with human nature. To interfere in the fruitful union between the energies of mankind and the energies of the planet. To try and regulate with government interference the spontaneity of this union will sap its naturel energy and put it at the paralyzing mercy of a costly bureaucracy financed by the tax paper. Our improvements to Beasley's Pond are a very good example of that free enterprise that distinguishes the economy and indeed the character of this great nation.43

Chisholm's appeal to delay decision on the pond until the laboratory tells he has initiated have been received, is brushed aside by a majority vote. To give the finishing touch to his diabolical speech the mayor reads out Sears's gently nostalgic and impassioned appeal to protect "the innocence of ice skating" on the pond, written well before he became aware of the ecological threat posed by dumping, and published in a newspaper. The letter sounds absurd to knowing ears, and the issue of the pond seems virtually closed. But Chisholm does to want to give up hope, as he expects the laboratory reports to be devastating. But he is knocked down dead by a speeding car while crossing the street. It is a deliberate murder just as the lawyer's was. Both lawyer and environmentalist are martyred to the cause. The novelist intentionally does not dwell on this ugly fact, as he wants this novel to be read on a quiet night, but the implication is obvious.

It is left to Betsy Logan to complete the task begun by Chisholm. It is out of gratitude...
and sympathy for him, who was a pure and helpful man rather than for Sears, whose letter read out by the mayor prejudice her too against him, that she takes the risk of doing her bit to save Beasley’s Pond. As a matter of fact, her plan to poison Teriyaki Sauce in the supermarket with ant poison with the threatening message, "stop poisoning Beasley’s Pond or I will poison the food in all 28 Buy Brites“ pasted on the bottle is both naive and foolhardy. Her success, after three days of determined and daring effort, and her going undetected are certainly improbable, even miraculous. But the table, as conceived and told by Cheever, accommodates the improbability. And any further pollution of the pond is ended forthwith.

The novel ends with touching upon the effect the restoration and reservation of the pond has on Sears, who organises the Beasley Foundation. As he conducts a tour of the pond by the visiting engineers from other countries which also face a similar ecological problem, all his gift for showmanship are fully and usefully displayed. It is nevertheless, amusing to see him enthusiastically and elaborately explaining to them in the proud, though technical, language of reclamation the steps taken to cure the water of its toxicity. Though Sears likes to believe that the resurrection of the pond has taught him some humility, his humanity is not very much apparent. Perhaps it is understandable because he has been instrumental in achieving something which was almost impossible, the forces ranged against being formidable. More importantly he has found "some sameness in the search for love and the search for potable water". In actively assisting the purification of Beasley’s Pond, he too has achieved a measure of purification within himself. From ignorance, lack of knowledge, about the world in which he finds himself, he moves towards a sense of the mystery of creation itself. This issues in
instinctive humility and praise for "those multiple worlds around us":

What moved him was a sense of those worlds around us, our knowledge however imperfect of their nature, our sense of their possessing some grain of our past and of our lives to come. It was that most powerful sense of our being alive on the planet. It was that most powerful sense of how singular in the vastness of creation, is this richness of our opportunity. The sense of that hour was an exquisite privilege, The great benefice of living here and renewing ourselves with love. What a paradise it seemed!

The novel ends on this note of humility, praise and quiet affirmation. The fate of the true criminals those villains who murdered the lawyer and the high-minded chisholm and seduced, bribed and corrupted the custodians of municipal welfare, who have to be punished in fairness to truth and justice, is left out, because it forms another tale, and would interfere with the spirit of the present story meant for a quiet night.

Though in the present analysis of What a Paradise Cheever's expression, 'ecological romance' has been preferred to the other labels suggested to describe its form, it has certainly something of the parable (in the sense that its story conveys a spiritual truth) and of the idyll. Satire of contemporary commercialism, the devious ways of the mafia, few surrealistic details also find a place in the narrative along with random memories, eccentric reflections, and overheard conversations. Cheever has been able to fabricate a form suited to his needs. In spite of seeming a medley, the narrative flows freely, no incident stands by itself, and is allied to the other narrative components. Oh What a Paradise It Seems seemed to be a parable, an idyll, a tall fable, a falls and also an ecological romance. As George Hunt has shown, "The word
'seems' is the story's central linguistic motif, repeated with variation on almost every page. Its many connotations are exploited expertly. 'Seems' might imply the discrepancy between appearance and reality, between illusion and fact, between aspiration and frustration. Then again, it can suggest a more positive discrepancy: that between the superficial and the genuine, between the outer and inner, between an aspect or glimmer and the truth itself.

Of these possible connotations of 'seems', which are used in different contexts of the novel, the last one ultimately points to the meaning of the novel. The planet which Sears gratefully contemplates holds for him and for other kindred spirits like Chisholm a glimmer of 'paradise', and therefore for them it seems so. It implies the aspiration, metaphorically speaking, to reclaim and return to the paradise which has been lost since the fall. The Chisholm religious meaning though not overt, is very clear. It is pure, purling streams, in the blue sky, and in places like the resurrected Beasley's Pond one finds a distant reflection of the time paradise. The polluted pond itself is emblematic of the fallen world, and the effort to reclaim it is an image of man's aspiration to regain it.
Notes and References


4. John Calaway, "Interview with John Cheever", *Conversations*, p.244.

5. The Wapshot Chronicle, p.81.


11. Ibid; p.297.

12. Ibid; p.297.

13. Oh What a Paradise It Seems (New York: Alfred A.Knopf, 1982), p.3 All quotations from the text are from this edition, the novel is hereafter referred to as *What a Paradise*.


15. Ibid; p.5.


17. Ibid; p.9.
18. Ibid; p.11.
19. Ibid; p.12.
25. Ibid; p. 36 - 37.
26. Ibid; p.50.
27. Ibid; p.71.
28. Ibid; p.72.
29. Ibid; p.73.
30. George W. Hunt, p.313.
31. What a Paradise, p.75.
32. Ibid;
33. Ibid; p.76.
34. Ibid; p.77.
35. Ibid; p.78.
37. What a Paradise, p.80.
38. Ibid; p.84.

41. Ibid; p.87.

42. Ibid; p.87. and p.91

43. Ibid; pp.87-88.

44. Ibid; p.99.

45. Ibid; p.100.

46. George W. Hunt, p.298.