

## Allegory of Risk Society in John Cheever's "The Swimmer"<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article suggests that Ulrich Beck's concept of the "risk society" provides a novel framework for interpreting literary texts, especially those dealing with themes such as uncertainty, disaster, and risk. Beck's theory delineates the transition from traditional to modern and postindustrial societies based on their perceptions of risk, hazard, and disaster, and this study focuses on John Cheever's seminal 1964 short story "The Swimmer" as it registers the historical shift from industrial to late-modern society. Beck's work has been influential in sociology but underutilized in literary studies, except for a limited number of narratives on climate change, environmental degradation, and nuclear disaster. Cheever's narrative, through the surreal and disorienting journey of its protagonist Neddy Merrill, is positioned in this article as an allegory of the rise of the risk society in the United States of America of the 1960s. "The Swimmer" is analyzed as a critique of the American dream and the existential decadence of affluent suburban life, where the protagonist's journey through suburban pools symbolizes a broader transition from the relatively predictable, orderly world of industrial modernity to the complex, unstable conditions of postindustrial society. The article argues that Cheever successfully captures the social consciousness of a period marked by growing awareness of insecurity, alienation, and risk. This interpretation contributes to the limited scholarly discourse on Cheever's story and offers a new perspective on the intersection of literature and sociological theories.

**Keywords:** *John Cheever, Ulrich Beck, The Swimmer, American Literature, Risk Society, Allegory*

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## John Cheever'in "The Swimmer" Öyküsünde Risk Toplumu Alegorisi<sup>3</sup>

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### Öz

Bu makale, Ulrich Beck'in "risk toplumu" kavramının, özellikle belirsizlik, felaket ve risk gibi temaları ele alan edebi metinleri yorumlamak için yeni bir çerçeve sunduğunu öne sürmektedir. Beck'in teorisi, geleneksel toplumlardan modern ve sanayi sonrası toplumlara geçişi, risk, tehlike ve felaket algıları temelinde ele alır. Bu çalışma, endüstriyel toplumdan geç modern topluma geçişin izlerini kaydeden bir eser olarak John Cheever'in 1964 tarihli çığır açıcı kısa öyküsü "The Swimmer"ı incelemektedir. Beck'in çalışmaları sosyolojide önemli etkiler bırakmış ancak sınırlı sayıdaki iklim değişikliği, çevresel yıkım ve nükleer felaket anlatısı dışında edebiyat incelemelerinde yeterince kullanılmamıştır. Cheever'in anlatısı, bu makalede, ana karakteri Neddy Merrill'in gerçeküstü ve okurda yön kaybı deneyimi oluşturan yolculuğu üzerinden 1960'larda Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde risk toplumunun yükselişini gösteren bir alegori olarak değerlendirilmektedir. "The Swimmer" Amerikan rüyasının ve müreffeh banliyö yaşamının varoluşsal çöküntüsünün bir eleştirisi olarak analiz edilmekte, ana karakterin banliyö havuzlarında yaptığı sıra dışı yolculuk ise endüstriyel modernitenin nispeten öngörülebilir, düzenli dünyasından sanayi sonrası toplumun karmaşık ve istikrarsız koşullarına geçişin bir simgesi olarak okunmaktadır. Bu makale, bahsi geçen kısa öyküsünde Cheever'in bir dönemin güvensizliğe, yabancılaşmaya ve riske dair artan toplumsal bilincini başarıyla yansıttığını iddia etmektedir. Bu yönüyle mevcut çalışma, Cheever'in öyküsü üzerine yapılan sınırlı akademik tartışmalara bir katkıda bulunmakta, edebiyat ile sosyolojik teori arasındaki kesişime dair yeni bir bakış açısı sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** John Cheever, Ulrich Beck, The Swimmer, Amerikan Edebiyatı, Risk Toplumu, Alegori

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## Introduction: The Scope of the Study

The history of humankind can be narrated through various periodizations, each offering a unique angle from which to structure and interpret the past. Depending on the chosen master code or key, human history can be clustered and analyzed in ways that highlight different aspects. For instance, when viewed through the lens of class struggle, history unfolds as a series of conflicts between dominant and subordinate classes, from ancient slave societies to modern capitalist economies. Similarly, a focus on the mode of production emphasizes the transitions from hunter-gatherer societies to agrarian, industrial, and digital economies, illustrating how developments in the means of social production and changes in their ownership have shaped the lives of people on individual and collective levels alike. Other periodizations might center on military developments, tracing the rise and fall of empires through the evolution of technology and warfare, or on civilizational classifications, which categorize history into distinct cultural epochs such as the Ancient, Medieval, and Modern, or on the role of reason and secular knowledge giving way to labels like the Dark Ages and the Enlightenment.

Possible others aside, in the context of contemporary history, German sociologist Ulrich Beck introduced the eponymous concept in his 1986 work *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, which marked a new periodization based on the unprecedented global risks that define our current era. Beck's theory offers a distinctive perspective on the transition from premodern (traditional) to modern (industrial) and finally to contemporary (postindustrial) societies, especially in terms of how they perceive, conceptualize, and deal with hazards, disasters, and risks. Beck's main argument is that contemporary society is characterized by globalized risks such as climate change, pandemics, and nuclear threats that transcend national boundaries and challenge the very foundations of modernity. This approach shifts the focus from the mentioned pointers of historical periods to the pervasive and interconnected risks that now shape human existence on a global scale, suggesting that we live in a new epoch where containing or managing these risks has become a burning issue for societies around the world.

It can be suggested that Ulrich Beck's risk theory, despite its profound impact on the social sciences, has been largely overlooked as an interpretive framework in literary studies. Nor has it been employed as a periodizing tool in literary histories. While his conceptualization of risk society and the ones preceding it offers a promising ground on which to examine literature, there has been scant scholarly effort to make use of Beck's theory in the analyses of literary themes, characters, and forms, except for the limited group of dystopian works dealing with global warming, environmental degradation, or nuclear destruction. Beck's formulation of societies based on their historical perceptions of hazards and risks could reveal new layers of meaning in a broader array of literary works, particularly those dealing with themes of danger, uncertainty, insecurity, and the consequences of modern life or technological and industrial developments. Integrating Beck's risk society with literature may enable us to better understand the portrayal of hazard and risk in narratives along with the role of literature in shaping or responding to the risk consciousness of different historical periods.

This is precisely what the present study aims to realize with regard to one of the pivotal works of American literature, that is John Cheever's enrapturing short story "The Swimmer" published in June 1964 in *The New Yorker*. This article will maintain that one of the reasons why "The Swimmer" constitutes a turning point in the literary landscape of the twentieth-century America is that it is a narrative that deals, among other things, with the rise of risk society, and it records the beginnings of the conflation of hazard and risk in our present world. "The Swimmer" captures the existential despair and alienation of the postwar suburban experience, and through the surreal journey of his protagonist Neddy Merrill, Cheever critiques the hollow pursuit of the American dream, foregrounding the disillusionment and emotional bankruptcy lurking beneath the surface of affluent suburban life.

Attending to this bankruptcy is the evolving social consciousness of the period regarding the notions of disaster, insecurity, and risk. This was the time when the optimism of the postwar industrial society began to wane, clearing the way for the uncertainties and anxieties that Beck later attributed to the risk society.

Cheever's narrative, following Neddy as he swims through suburban pools, serves as a poignant metaphor for the changing conditions of individuals vis-à-vis the glorified American way of life. Veysel İççi (2023) observes that in "The Swimmer," Cheever first presents an affluent, elite world where adults leisurely spend their afternoons by the pool, sipping drinks and reveling in their social standing. Yet, beneath this surface of joy and indulgence lies a rigid social hierarchies, fragile relationships, and an underlying sense of melancholy (p.35). It will be demonstrated in the present study that "The Swimmer" allegorizes a kind of transition, the crossing of a threshold between the rather confident, orderly, predictable world of industrial modernity and the complex, unstable, and unpredictable realities of postindustrial social existence, thereby causing the melancholy stated above.

## Traditional, Industrial, and the Risk Society

Often referred to as a master chronicler of Americana and "the Chekhov of the suburbs" (Foderaro, 2014; Chilton, 2015), John Cheever has gained a permanent place in anthologies of American literature with "The Swimmer." Four years after its publication, the story was made into a critically acclaimed film directed by Frank Perry and Sydney Pollock, starring Burt Lancaster as the protagonist Neddy Merrill. It is known that Cheever initially planned to write Neddy's story as a novel whose manuscript had reached 150 pages when he changed his mind after two months of rigorous work, an unusually extended effort for an author who claimed to finish his stories typically in three days (Bloom, 2001, p. 85). "It's quite a good story," Cheever says. However, he adds that "[i]t was a terribly difficult story to write. Because I couldn't ever show my hand" (cited in Ullrich, 2022, p. 226). One thinks that paring the bulky manuscript of a novel-in-progress to fifteen pages or so must have helped Cheever to hide his hand, and that some of the story's opaque, almost enigmatic aspects that have continued to perplex the readers might have resulted from this substantial elimination.

Another significant point about Cheever is that although he had great success as a writer in the eyes of reading public, neither during nor after his lifetime have academic critics shown sufficient interest in his work, including "The Swimmer" (Slabey, 1982, p. 181). In an article published in 2022, David Ullrich notes that "of the thirty-one entries for 'The Swimmer' in the MLA Bibliography, only one (...) has been listed since 2007, and many of the earlier entries consist of very short notes" (p. 226). Thus, this study hopes to contribute to the small pool of scholarly examinations on "The Swimmer," and it intends to do so with reference to the distinction Ulrich Beck makes between hazard and risk, the three types of society he defines on this basis, and through the discussion of how Cheever creates an allegory of the historical shift particularly from industrial to postindustrial society.

According to Beck, premodern society was profoundly affected by such major natural hazards as earthquakes, droughts, volcanic activities, or floods along with epidemic disasters like cholera and the plague, none of which were human-made and against which nothing could be done. In traditional societies, hazards and disasters were primarily seen as external threats, often interpreted as acts of vengeful gods or nature itself. These threats were unpredictable and beyond human control, but they were also regarded as inevitable aspects of life (Beck, 2009, p. 6). The response to these threats was largely reactive, rooted in religious or supernatural explanations. Hence, the idea of human agency in creating or preventing such disasters was minimal in premodern societies as the focus was on appeasing gods or deciphering the wills of omens and nature rather than on systematic prevention or management. In these societies, "risks remained in essence 'blows of fate' that assaulted human beings from 'outside'" (Beck, 2009, p. 7).

In industrial society or what Beck calls simple modernity, however, human-made risks replaced the older hazards and disasters that were attached to supernatural powers and fate. Occupational, financial, or health-related, these risks were limited in their range; they were localizable, containable, and even predictable. With the advent of modern society, risks increasingly became the result of human actions, particularly those that emerged with industrialization and technological advancements. Beck suggests that,

these hazards associated with industrialization do not become a political issue because of their scale but because of a social feature: they do not assail us like a fate; rather we create them ourselves, they are a product of human hands and minds, of the link between technical knowledge and the economic utility calculus (2009, p. 25).

Risks, in this context, are calculable and can be managed through scientific knowledge and technological interventions. The modern society is distinguished by its belief in progress and the ability to control nature. The industrial era saw the development of institutions and regulations aimed at mitigating risks, such as health and safety regulations, insurance systems, and environmental protection laws. These institutions were in one way or another based on the assumption that risks could be predicted, quantified, and managed.

However, things change drastically with the coming onstage of postindustrial society:

At the center lie the risks and consequences of modernization, which are revealed as irreversible threats to the life of plants, animals, and human beings. Unlike the factory-related or occupational hazards of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, these can no longer be limited to certain localities or groups, but rather exhibit a tendency to globalization which spans production *and* reproduction as much as national borders, and in this sense brings into being *supra*-national and *non*-class-specific *global hazards* with a new type of social and political dynamism (emphasis original, Beck, 1992, p. 13).

Moreover, with the rise of risk society, the archaic feeling of insecurity and the mystical or magical quality of premodern world have reemerged on a global level; and “[a]s uncontrollable (side) effects of the triumphs of autonomized modernization: uncertainty returns” (Beck, Giddens, and Lash, 1994, p. 183). Beck refers to the new risks that characterize the risk society of late modernity as self-jeopardy or human-induced disasters that include radioactive leaks, climate change, genetic technologies, and terrorism. Moreover, Sorensen and Christiansen (2013) argue that these new risks or non-natural hazards “amalgamate the characteristics of traditional risks and hazards: they are both erratic and uncontrollable and, at the same time, they are man-made (i.e. products of our industrial way of life)” (p. 24). The consequences of these risks are often unpredictable. Therefore, this era is marked by the awareness that the very technologies or mechanisms that were designed to reduce risks have themselves become sources of new, unprecedented risks.

## Reading “The Swimmer” with Beck

Cheever’s (2009) story, which, in so subtle ways, contains the sociological narrative outlined above, opens with a paragraph that neatly encapsulates the American suburbia, the world of “The Swimmer,” populated by suburbanites like Neddy Merrill:

It was one of those midsummer Sundays when everyone sits around saying, “I *drank* too much last night.” You might have heard it whispered by the parishioners leaving church, heard it from the lips of the priest himself, struggling with his cassock in the *vestiarium*, heard it from the golf links and the tennis courts, heard it from the wildlife preserve where the leader of the Audubon group was suffering from a terrible hangover. “I *drank* too much,” said Donald Westerhazy. “We all *drank* too much,” said Lucinda Merrill. “It must have been the wine,” said Helen Westerhazy. “I *drank* too much of that claret” (p. 726).

In this symbolic *mise en scène* of wealth, somnolent leisure, and torpid comfort, Neddy is holding a glass of gin in one hand while dipping the other into the green water of the Westerhazys’ pool around which the attendees of a house party are trying to recover from their hangovers. Neddy thinks about his house located eight miles to the south and his “four beautiful daughters” who might be just about to have their lunch or play tennis.

Then, all of a sudden, it occurs to him that he could go back to his home by water, swimming in the fifteen backyard pools that lie between the Westerhazys’ and his house in Bullet Park. All these pools belong to his affluent friends, except for one, which is the public pool in Lancaster. Neddy’s self-avowed motivation is explained by the narrator as follows:

He seemed to see, with a cartographer's eye, that string of swimming pools, that quasi-subterranean stream that curved across the county. He had made a discovery, a contribution to modern geography; he would name the stream Lucinda after his wife. He was not a practical joker nor was he a fool but he was determinedly original and had a vague and modest idea of himself as a legendary figure. The day was beautiful and it seemed to him that a long swim might enlarge and celebrate its beauty (p. 727).

Swimming through the Westerhazys' pool with the self-caused enthusiasm of an *original* hero, Neddy embarks on his journey with great joy and youthful energy, although he was "far from young" and "[i]n the west there was a massive stand of cumulus cloud" (p. 726) foreshadowing an ominous turn of events. The pools of the Grahams, the Hammers, and the Lears, he swims cheerfully, without encountering any difficulties. Mrs. Graham serves him a drink, and as Neddy the explorer starts to think that he is being held up at the Grahams', he is rescued by a large group of people arriving from Connecticut for a celebration.

The next two neighbors—the Howlands and the Crosscups—are away, so Neddy quickly swims their pools and moves on to the Bunkers' house, where he finds himself in the middle of a party and has another drink. Then he walks to the Levys' empty yard, where he observes yellow and red maple leaves, and the traces of a party that has just ended. After his swim, Neddy helps himself to another drink, and while he feels "tired, clean, and pleased (...) pleased with everything," it suddenly grows dark, and a storm breaks (p. 729). He then leaves for the Welchers', and on his way, he realizes that the Lindleys' horse-riding ring is "overgrown with grass and all the jumps dismantled" (p. 730). He finds the Welchers' pool dry, and their bathhouse is locked. "[D]isappointed and mystified" (p. 730), Neddy walks on to his most difficult portage, Route 424, where he is seen in an utterly pathetic condition, "[s]tanding barefoot in the deposits of the highway—beer cans, rags, and blowout patches—exposed to all kinds of ridicule," and there, "[h]e was laughed at, jeered at, a beer can was thrown at him, and he had no dignity or humor to bring to the situation" (p. 731).

This is the crescendo in "The Swimmer," and after this highway sequence, in the second half of Neddy's journey, the tone gets much gloomier, the mood becomes much more surrealistic, and the limited omniscient narrator starts to gain a distance from Neddy's mind to portray him in a more sarcastic way. The packed and regimented public pool looks muddy and reeks of chlorine; and during the episode where he swims the pools of the Hallorans, the Sachses, the Biswangers, his ex-mistress Shirley Adams, the Gilmartins, and the Clydes, Neddy gets increasingly sick, old, fatigued, disoriented, amnesiac, and detached from reality. He encounters friends who are now distant or hostile towards him, hinting at some underlying tension or conflict in his past. His sense of time and space begins to fall apart. Neddy's expedition is supposed to last a few afternoon hours; however, it feels as though he swims for three quarters of a year. The story opens on a midsummer day but as it unfolds, we first get such signs of the fall as the smell of wood smoke on the wind as well as chrysanthemums or marigolds releasing a smell "strong as gas," and the darkness that falls early although these are the "longest days in the year" (p. 735-736). Then, the waters in the pools that Neddy swims get icy cold and reflect wintry gleams, and he notices the midwinter constellations Andromeda, Cepheus, and Cassiopeia up in the night sky. Eventually, wondering in his loose swim trunks if he has lost weight, Neddy arrives in Bullet Park to find his house dark, empty, locked, and in a sad state of disrepair, and his wife and daughters are all gone.

Cheever remarks that his short story "should be taken at face value. The fact that the constellations change, that the foliage changes, that all time is completely dislocated or altered in the story, ought to be taken at face value" (cited in Bloom, p. 87). Its author's suggestion notwithstanding, "The Swimmer" has provoked several interpretations that mostly allude to ancient myths and epics, medieval romances, Shakespearean parallels, or to the annals of colonization and the New World travelogues to make sense of its combining realism and surrealism, and a linear narrative and ambiguous temporal coordinates. Cheever portrays modern American suburbia using a realist style while simultaneously exploring the protagonist's inner thoughts and emotions, whereby the story's content remains ambiguously suspended between dream, illusion, fantasy, and reality (İşçi, 2023, p. 35), giving way to the critical approaches below.

Based on the journey or the quest pattern, “The Swimmer” has been examined as an ironic rewriting of Homer’s *Odyssey* (Bowers, 2007) and of the Holy Grail legends and romances that highlights a number of contrasts between the epic and chivalric hero and the anti-heroic modern individual (Blythe and Sweet, 1992). It has also been read as a retelling of some of the myths included in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (Auser, 1967) and as a spiritual allegory that provides an inverted version of the virtues promoted in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, particularly in the “Inferno” sequence (Kozikowski, 1993). Furthermore, Cheever’s story has been interpreted as a dark reworking of the adventures of the legendary Spanish explorer Ponce de Leon and his hazardous journeys (Blythe and Sweet, 1989), and as a pessimistic rewriting of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as it is set on a sunny and warm midsummer day but ends on a stormy winter night (Bell, 1987). Through historical and etymological analyses of all the names that Cheever chose to use in “The Swimmer,” the text has been read as a rendering of how the northeastern “Englishman turns into the Wandering Jew” (Byrne, 1986). Finally, it has been treated as a satirical distortion of the three holy sacraments of Christianity—marriage, baptism, and the Eucharist—as Neddy is an adulterer, he gets “dirtier” and “drunker” as he swims, and he is eventually excluded from the communion of his fellows (Blythe, 1984, p. 393).

The reasons for this exclusion are not explained at length in the story, but we get several glimpses particularly in the second leg of Neddy’s journey. Terence Bowers (2007) proposes that “The Swimmer” is not only about its protagonist’s personal odyssey, but

[it] is also about the world he travels through—suburbia, that ideal American landscape of safe streets, family-centered neighborhoods, and nice homes, which became the focal point of the collective desires of post-World War II America. (...) Like Neddy, many people have believed in suburbia as a Utopian realm, which had become “part of the American dream” and closely linked to the nation’s collective vision of happiness (pp. 23, 30).

However, Kathryn Riley (1983) notes that “Cheever’s characters live in a world that is confusing, absurd, or potentially menacing. The source of dramatic conflict in Cheever’s works is, typically, unexpected and unexplainable by the laws of logic” (p. 22). Similarly, Robert Slabey suggests that both in actuality and in Cheever’s works “[s]uburbia is built over the abyss from which disaster and darkness occasionally emerge,” and the suburbanites live “on the thin surface hiding terror and violence and pain” (p. 181).

Without reliable memories and a sense of reality, Neddy seems to have been struck by some disastrous force coming from that baffling, irrational, and terrorizing external world. Three brief instances shed light on the hazard or menace that has profoundly mystified Neddy. When he arrives at the Hallorans’ estate, he tells Mrs. Halloran that he has been swimming across the county, to which the latter replies by saying:

“We’ve been *terribly* sorry to hear about all your misfortunes, Neddy.”

“My misfortunes?” Ned asked. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Why, we heard that you’d sold the house and that your poor children . . .”

“I don’t recall having sold the house,” Ned said, “and the girls are at home.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Halloran sighed. “Yes . . .” (p. 733).

The second instance is when Neddy goes to swim in the Biswangers’ pool. He and Lucinda have always declined Grace Biswanger’s party invitations simply because they believed that they were in a more elevated social position than the *nouveau riche* Biswangers. But now, it is Neddy himself who is humiliated and rebuffed at the Biswangers’ pool party by Grace who calls him a “gate crasher,” and when he asks for a whiskey, the bartender serves him quite rudely. Gulping down his drink, Neddy hears Grace’s voice from his back:

“They went for broke overnight (...) and he showed up drunk one Sunday and asked us to loan him five thousand dollars...” She was always talking about money. It was worse than eating your peas off a knife. He dove into the pool, swam its length and went away (p. 735).

The next pool belongs to his ex-mistress Shirley Adams, who is puzzled to see him in her yard: “What do you want?” she asked. (...) ‘If you’ve come here for money (...) I won’t give you another cent’” (p. 736). And with this third instance, it becomes abundantly clear that Neddy has gone not only emotionally but also literally bankrupt; he has lost everything, including his family and home—and it all happened overnight!

Slabey observes that Neddy resorts to a myth of private gratification to offset a public despair. However, neither this despair nor the disaster and darkness mentioned before can derive from only the suburban ennui or, in Slabey’s words, “the American emptiness between Pepsi-Cola and Geritol” (p. 183). It can be suggested that these are related on a more profound level to the element of risk in industrial society which, as “The Swimmer” progresses, appears to have already colored the entire diegetic space of the narrative and Neddy’s consciousness—and these two often bleed into each other to a considerable extent. Neddy Merrill begins his journey believing in the stability of his social world—his wealth, family, and community ties. However, as he moves from pool to pool, he encounters signs of social dissolution: people treat him with coldness, he experiences sudden financial ruin, and his home is abandoned. His realization mirrors Beck’s argument that the institutions and “traditional support networks” that once structured life such as family or neighborhood no longer offer security (1992, p. 93). Cheever’s story can thus be read as dramatizing the loss of industrial society’s stabilizing structures.

In this connection, Cheever’s story can also be read as an allegory of the psychological regression one experiences in the face of devastating risk, as testified by Neddy’s fantasies of grandeur and virile masculinity, and by his immersion in myth and legend. These “solutions” that the protagonist tries to utilize recall the distinction Beck makes between “individuation” and “individualization.” While “individuation” refers to the processes of modernity by which human subjects are liberated from traditional forms of suppression and indoctrination, “individualization” signifies the fact that in contemporary society the individual is left all alone with the responsibility of coping with the risks that it faces. As Beck maintains, “[u]nder these conditions, how one lives becomes the *biographical solution of systemic contradictions*” (emphasis original, 1992, p. 137). It seems possible to argue that Neddy’s increasingly delusional state is the only biographical (i.e. non-collective, personal) solution that is available to him in the way of alleviating the suffering caused by his social and economic fall.

“The Swimmer” is a remarkable narrative in that it contains in sedimented form all three senses and experiences of the premodern natural or divine, non-localizable, and non-controllable hazard; the industrial human-made, limited-range, predictable, and therefore controllable risk; and the postindustrial human-made, non-localizable, and non-containable hazard. It is clear that Neddy’s going broke overnight and losing all material and symbolic assets that he once possessed, i.e. the whole disaster that he has suffered, results from a kind of risk that has wrecked only him and his family, thereby working in a localized and limited way. Besides, quite in line with Beck’s definition of risk in industrial society, Neddy’s downfall is in all probability a consequence of his own choices, and even if that is not the case, it must have been caused by the dynamics of late capitalist market or finance economy, which are equally human-made as capital itself is the product of human labor.

However, there are several other elements in “The Swimmer” which suggest that the destruction that has befallen Neddy may not be the consequence of a merely personalized risk. For instance, Ullrich proposes that the Welchers, “who have presumably welched on their debts, prefigure Neddy’s own fate, as their house is closed up” (p. 229). Likewise, as Bowers states, apart from Neddy’s deserted and derelict house,

we see other houses in various states of abandonment or decline—such as the Levys’ empty house, which had “no signs of life,” the Lindleys’ home with its “overgrown” riding ring and “dismantled” horse jumps, and the Welchers’ house with its “dry” pool and “FOR SALE sign” in the driveway. Such images contribute to a disquieting sense of disintegration that goes beyond Neddy’s family (p. 24).

These examples point to a social condition that operates on a much broader scale, encompassing Neddy’s and his neighbors’ world as a whole, keeping the sinister and pervasive presence of blind risk alive across



suburbia, just like that storm which quickly gathers and finally breaks in the middle of the story, affecting not only the protagonist but the entire neighborhood. This storm metaphorizes the foreboding consciousness of risk on the part of both Neddy and the other characters. Beck remarks that “risks are not catastrophes, not the ‘case of damage.’ They are the believed expectation of catastrophes” (interview, Wimmer and Quandt, 2007, p. 341). Considering that Neddy’s gradually darkening mood takes hold of the entire neighborhood that represents all American suburbs, one can suggest that this increasingly powerful collective expectation, or what was previously called perception, of human-made generalized hazards is one significant element that lends the universe of “The Swimmer” to being qualified as risk society.

## Conclusion

The new risks brought about by late modernity or risk society bear a strange dual quality—as Beck sees them, they combine the “naturalness” of premodern hazards and the human-made quality of industrial society’s risks. They feature, in this regard, as human-made hazards that are unpredictable, uncontrollable, and unfathomable. This designation too applies especially to the advance of late capitalism as a transnational global system that predominantly relies on finance capital. As a social product of labor, capital is at bottom human-made; but as a mode of production or as an economic system, capitalism operates as a thoroughly impersonal and mysterious system, whose workings resemble indifferent destiny or capricious fate that no one can fully describe or theorize in a rational way. This becomes even more evident every time the so-called invisible hand of the market proves its mythical nature by failing to regulate the system to create the greatest common good instead of endless economic crises that wreak havoc not only on individuals like Neddy but also on much larger social groups, nations, or even continents. To reiterate, “The Swimmer” was written in 1964, a momentous transitional period between the older type of industrial society and late capitalism that gave way to Beck’s risk society. Therefore, it seems that Cheever was able to diagnose the changing nature of risk with the coming of that new society, and he managed to portray that transformation in his highly influential story.

As demonstrated above, there are various interpretations of “The Swimmer” that regard it as a kind of re-writing of ancient epics and myths, medieval chivalric romances, and legends of colonial discovery and conquest. These analyses are certainly helpful in understanding this rich story, and there should be little doubt that with his narrative choice to use patterns of epics, myths, and legends, Cheever intends to give a contrasting satirical depiction of the life in contemporary American suburbs as well as the mindsets of their inhabitants. However, the psychological disposition of Neddy himself begs more scrutinizing, as this article has tried to do. Echoing Neddy’s world and mental setup in “The Swimmer,” Beck (2006) writes that denial and apathy are two possible reactions to risk as far as it is “experienced as omnipresent” (p. 331). It is unmistakable that Neddy is in denial of his current reality; yet he seems to experience not apathy but regression to, or hyper-identification with, certain codes of premodernity as opposed to the continuously threatening and hazardous risk atmosphere of late modernity.

We see here the dynamics of what Beck terms as “individualization” in the risk society: “Individualization means the disintegration of the certainties of industrial society as well as the compulsion to find and invent new certainties for oneself and others without being able to rely on existing certainties” (Rossi, 2014, p. 61). That is precisely the reason why Neddy slides into various fantasies of grandeur and regresses to the pre-modern world of ancient epic heroism and manly glory, medieval legends of masculine control and strategy, and the early modern examples of colonialist bravado and conquering power. Neddy must resort to such delusional and oblivious fantasies because he has crushed into risk (or vice versa) and lost everything that made him the person that he was, and as such, he is now in desperate need to regain an identity by clinging on to archaic and false certainties, believing that he is “a pilgrim, an explorer, a man with a destiny” (p. 727) that can overpower that other, contemporary kind of fate called risk.

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## Genişletilmiş Özet

### Amaç

Bu çalışmanın temel amacı, Alman sosyolog Ulrich Beck'in sosyal bilimlerin çeşitli alanlarında güçlü bir etki bırakmış olan "risk toplumu" teorisinin edebiyat incelemeleri için nasıl bir yorumlama çerçevesi sunabileceğini araştırmaktır. İklim değişikliği, çevresel yıkım veya nükleer tehdit gibi konuları ele alan eserler dışında Beck'in teorisinin edebiyat araştırmaları için ne gibi olanaklar sunduğu konusu yeterince ele alınmamıştır. Bu çalışma, sözü edilen gözlemden hareketle inceleme metni olarak Amerikalı yazar John Chee-

ver'in 1964 yılında New Yorker dergisinde basılan, yayımlandığı günden itibaren okurlar nezdinde büyük ses getirse ve antolojilerde yer bulsa da hak ettiği akademik ilgiyi göremeyen "The Swimmer" başlıklı kısa öyküsüne odaklanmaktadır. Makale bir yandan Beck'in teorisinin edebi metinleri çözümlerken nasıl kullanılabileceğine dair bir örnek sunmaya çalışırken, diğer yandan da "The Swimmer" başlıklı öykünün Beck'in sözünü ettiği modern endüstriyel toplumdaki geç modern risk toplumuna geçişi yansıttığını, böylece ortaya çıkan yeni toplumsal dinamikleri baş karakter Neddy Merrill'in psikolojik durumu üzerinden temsil ettiğini göstermeyi hedeflemektedir.

## Tasarım ve Yöntem

Bu makalenin giriş kısmında çalışmanın yukarıda yer verilen amacı, teorik çerçevesi ve birincil kaynakları tanıtılmakta, ardından Ulrich Beck'in risk toplumu kavramının tarihsel koşulları ve ana hatları sunulmaktadır. Bu çerçevede detaylandırılmaktadır. Buna göre, günümüz toplumları giderek tarihte hiç olmadığı kadar fazla ve daha önce hiç rastlanılmayan türden risklerle karşı karşıya kalmıştır. Bu riskler, geleneksel toplumların genellikle bir dizi tanrısal veya doğaüstü güce atfettikleri deprem, sel, kıtlık veya veba gibi felaketlerden ziyade, toplumsal, siyasal veya ekonomik kurumların eylemleri sonucu ortaya çıkan insan yapımı tehlikelerdir. Beck'e göre sanayi devrimini takip eden modern toplumlardaki teknolojik-bilimsel gelişmeler ve ekonomik büyüme, bu toplumları daha güvenli ve öngörülebilir kılmıştır. Modern endüstriyel toplumlarda görülen trafik veya iş kazaları gibi riskler bu nedenle yerel, bireysel ve kontrol edilebilir niteliktedir. Ancak, aynı teknolojik ve ekonomik gelişmeler zaman içinde çevresel yıkım, nükleer felaket ve çok kapsamlı ekonomik krizler gibi yeni riskler yaratmıştır. Beck'e göre sanayi sonrası günümüz toplumları artık bu riskleri yönetemez ve onlarla başa çıkamaz durumdadır. Sonuç olarak bu koşullar sanayi toplumuna ait toplumsal yapıları, ilişkileri ve öznellikleri kökünden dönüştürür.

Çalışma, takip eden bölümde, Ulrich Beck'in ana hatlarıyla sunulan sosyolojik teorisi temelinde Cheever'ın "The Swimmer" öyküsünü yorumlamak için yakın okuma odaklı bir edebi metin analizi yöntemi benimsenmektedir. Öncelikle öykünün bugüne dek yapılmış okuma ve çözümlemeleri ele alınmaktadır. Buna göre Cheever'ın öyküsünün genel olarak antik çağ destanlarının, Ortaçağ romanslarının, Shakespeare'in bazı eserlerinin, erken modern dönem kolonyalist tarih ve keşif anlatılarının bir yeniden yazımı olarak değerlendirildiği tespit edilmektedir. Ardından, en önemli ve çarpıcı unsurları üzerinden metnin Beck'in bakış açısından bir incelemesi yapılmakta, Cheever'ın risk, tehlike, yıkım, güvensizlik ve değişen modernlik temaları ekseninde o dönemde yeni oluşmakta olan risk toplumunun toplumsal ve tarihsel özelliklerini kaydeden bir alegori ürettiği gösterilmektedir.

## Bulgular

John Cheever'ın "The Swimmer" adlı kısa öyküsünde baş karakter Neddy Merrill'in bir yaz günü evine dönmek için bir dizi banliyö havuzunu yüzerek geçme kararı alması ve bunu hayata geçirirken yaşadıkları anlatılmaktadır. Yukarıdaki epik veya romans yapısı göndermeli okumalara kapı açan Neddy'nin bu yolculuğu başlangıçta basit ve eğlenceli bir macera gibi görünse de öykü ilerledikçe oldukça karanlık ve kasvetli bir hal alır. Çalışmada gösterildiği üzere bu yüzme macerası her şeyden önce Amerikan rüyasının ve banliyö yaşamının yüzeysel huzurunun ardındaki derin varoluşsal kaygıları ve belirsizlikleri simgelemektedir.

Dahası, Neddy bu yolculuk sırasında zamanın hızla geçtiğini ve mevsimlerin değiştiğini fark eder. Benzer biçimde, başlangıçta kendine güvenen ve kontrol sahibi bir karakter gibi görünse de yolculuğu sırasında bu kontrolü kaybetmeye başlar. Makalede bu durumun Beck'in teorisi bağlamında modern toplumdaki risk toplumuna geçişte karşılaşılan dönüşümleri yansıttığı, modern bireylerdeki teknolojik ve ekonomik gelişmelerin getirdiği güvenlik ve öngörülebilirlik hissini risk toplumunda artık bir yanılsamadan başka bir şey olmadığı ortaya konmuştur. Diğer bir deyişle, Neddy Merrill'in Amerikan banliyösündeki havuzlarda

yaptığı yolculuk ve bu yolculuk esnasında gözlemlenen gerçeküstü ve kaygı uyandırıcı değişimin, tehlike ve risklerin rasyonel biçimde hesaplanıp kontrol edilebildiği sanayi modernliğinden karmaşık, istikrarsız ve öngörülemez sanayi sonrası risk toplumuna geçişin bir alegorisi olduğu gösterilmiştir. Dolayısıyla, Neddy'ye öykünün başında eşlik eden kahramanlık, gençlik, maceracılık ve erkeklik gibi fantezilerin risk toplumunun getirdiği genelleşmiş belirsizlik ve tehlike ortamı karşısında, sahte de olsa birtakım kesinliklere sığınma işlevi gördüğü anlatılmıştır.

Bu çalışma, John Cheever'ın "The Swimmer" başlıklı öyküsünün sadece Amerikan ve dünya edebiyatında bireysel bir yıkımı psikolojik açıdan ustalıkla ele alan bir metin olarak değil, aynı zamanda risk toplumunun yükselişini sezen ve yansıtan bir eser olarak da önem taşıdığını göstermiştir. 1960'lerde Amerika'da ivme kazanan toplumsal ve ekonomik dönüşümlerin ortasında yazılan bu öyküde Neddy Merrill'in bir zamanlar yaşadığı varlıklı muhitteki yüzme havuzları boyunca yaptığı yolculuk, geleneksel Amerikan banliyö hayatının sınırlarını aşan, yeni ekonomik ve toplumsal krizlerle risklerin habercisi olan ve bunların yarattığı etkinin üstesinden gelmeye çalışan bir eylem biçiminde yorumlanmıştır. Bu incelemede Cheever'ın yazdığı bireysel çöküş ve kaçış anlatısı üzerinden risk toplumunun doğuşunu ve bireylerin bu karmaşık ve daha önce görülmemiş toplumsal yapı karşısındaki kırılganlıklarını kayda alan bir edebiyat metni yarattığı açıklanmıştır. Bu nedenle "The Swimmer" öyküsü edebiyat çalışmaları alanında yapılan ve bu makalede değinilen yaygın değerlendirilmelerin ötesinde, döneminin yeni tipte risklerin yol açtığı toplumsal kaygılarını ele alması açısından da son derece çarpıcıdır.

## Sınırlılıklar

Çalışma tek bir edebi metne odaklanması ve birincil yorumlama çerçevesi olarak Ulrich Beck'in sosyolojik risk toplumu teorisine dayanması bakımından sınırlı görülebilir. Ayrıca Beck'in risk teorisiyle uyum olmayan diğer olası okuma veya yorum pratikleri makalenin çerçevesi dışında bırakılmıştır. Zira, çalışmada da gösterildiği gibi, John Cheever ve özel olarak da "The Swimmer" öyküsü hakkında yazılmış akademik çalışmalar yok denecek kadar azdır.

## Öneriler

Yukarıda bahsedilen sınırlılıklar çalışmanın sonuçlarının genel geçerliliğini etkileyebilir. Ne var ki bunlar aynı zamanda gelecekte yapılacak araştırmalar için bir temel de oluşturabilir. Beck'in teorisinin diğer edebi eserlerde nasıl uygulanabileceği veya diğer sosyolojik teorilerin edebi metin çözümlemelerine nasıl katkıda bulunabileceği gibi konular gelecekteki araştırmalar için ilginç ve değerli bir alan sunar.

## Özgün Değer

Bu çalışma, iklim değişikliği, çevresel yıkım ya da nükleer felaket metinleri dışında edebiyat incelemeleri alanında neredeyse hiç başvurulmayan Ulrich Beck'in "risk toplumu" teorisini John Cheever'ın modern Amerikan edebiyatında önemli bir yere sahip olan 1964 tarihli "The Swimmer" öyküsünün çözümlemesinde kullanarak alanına bir katkıda bulunmayı hedeflemektedir. Makale, özgün bir yorum sunarak söz konusu öyküyü çağdaş sosyolojik düşünceyle edebiyat çalışmalarının kesişim noktasına yerleştirmektedir. Ayrıca bu çalışma, Cheever'ın öyküsü üzerine yapılmış kısıtlı akademik çalışmalardan oluşan son derece dar bir havuza da katkıda bulunmakta, edebiyat eleştirisinde disiplinlerarası yaklaşımların potansiyelini göstermektedir. Bu anlamda edebiyat incelemeleri alanını, sayıları çok da olsa yalnızca mevcut "eleştiri kuramları" ile sınırlamamak gerektiğini vurgulamaktadır.