The Enormous Radio

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN CHEEVER

John Cheever was the second son of a middle-class family. His father, originally a successful shoe manufacturer in New England, lost money in the declining economy, and the family fell into financial straits. As a young student, Cheever attended Thayer Academy, but was later expelled; he wrote a short story, "Expelled," about the experience, which was published in 1930 in *The New Republic*. In 1938, he worked as an editor for the Federal Writers' Project in Washington, D.C., and married his wife, Mary Winternitz, in 1941. In 1942, Cheever enlisted in the Army and became part of the Signal Corps; a year later, in 1943, he published his first collection of short stories, *The Way Some People Live*. Cheever's short stories were published in many magazines, including *The Atlantic* and *The New Republic*, but he was often associated with the style and aesthetic sensibility of *The New Yorker*. After the war, Cheever moved his family to Sutton Place, in Manhattan, and then out to the suburbs, eventually residing—from 1961 onwards—in Ossining, New York. Many of his stories draw clear inspiration from this suburban milieu, including those in his 1953 collection *The Enormous Radio and Other Stories* and *The Stories of John Cheever* (1978), the latter of which won both the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1979. His debut novel, *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957), won the U.S. National Book Award for Fiction. Despite his notoriety, Cheever's personal life was troubled: he was a heavy drinker, received psychiatric treatment for depression, and sustained multiple affairs with both men and women. He was diagnosed with cancer in 1981, and died in 1982.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Westcotts, alongside many of their neighbors, hide deep-seated worries about their financial stability; this preoccupation with finances is characteristic of the Depression and post-Depression era in the United States. Though the Great Depression—an ongoing period of financial uncertainty—ended years before the publication of this particular story, Cheever grew up during this era, and his family's livelihood and social standing were impacted by precipitous shifts in the economy throughout his childhood. Cheever was also writing shortly after the end of World War II, a time of great cultural upheaval as soldiers returned to civilian life. This period also marked the start of the "Baby Boom," which saw a temporary increase in the national birth rate. This renewed emphasis on domesticity is reflected in Cheever's characters' desire to maintain an air of social respectability and familial normalcy.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"The Enormous Radio" dramatizes the domestic life of the Westcotts, who live in New York City and dream of moving to the suburbs. The story, which reveals the anxieties that remain hidden beneath the couple's untroubled façade, acts as a thematic antecedent to Cheever's later stories chronicling life in suburbia. These later stories fit within the genres of "suburban gothic" or "domestic gothic"—stories within this genre often discuss themes of marital tension and household unhappiness, and were typical of Cheever's era. Other writers, like Richard Yates and John Updike, often wrote on similar themes of middle-class disillusionment; in fact, Cheever once lived in a suburban home that had been previously owned by Richard Yates, who wrote the novel *Revolutionary Road*. Like "The Enormous Radio," *Revolutionary Road* chronicles the slow dissolution of a couple's picturesque lifestyle. Additionally, Cheever was known as the "Chekhov of the Suburbs," as, like Anton Chekhov (*The Cherry Orchard*, *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*), he often wrote sharply observant short stories about unhappy or conflicted characters. With Cheever's story itself, Irene quotes a passage from William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, a play known for containing a speech about the "quality of mercy." The speech highlights how mercy and understanding are the kindest offerings one can make to one's peers. Within the context of the story, Irene's quote is thus ironic: she is rendering judgment on her neighbors when she should be merciful and sympathetic to their problems.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Enormous Radio
- **When Written:** 1947
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 1947
- **Literary Period:** Twentieth century literature, Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short story, Domestic Gothic
- **Setting:** An apartment building in Sutton Place, a neighborhood of New York City.
- **Climax:** Irene, having overheard her neighbor beating his wife via the radio, begs Jim to intervene. In response, Jim turns off the radio—and act to which Irene ultimately does not object.
- **Antagonist:** The radio
- **Point of View:** Third person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo. The Westcotts overhear Miss Armstrong, a nurse who cares for the children of the Sweeneys, sing a nonsensical poem as a lullaby. The poem, written by Edward Lear, is titled "The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo," It describes the doomed relationship between the titular gentleman, Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo, and Lady Jingly Jones.

PLOT SUMMARY

Jim and Irene Westcott are a very average middle-class couple with two young children in New York City. They are unique only in their shared love music, though they choose to keep their interest a secret from their acquaintances. After the couple's old radio breaks down, they replace it with an expensive model that looks aggressively out of place in Irene's carefully designed living room. Irene tries to get used to this **new radio**'s presence, but its "malevolent" appearance forces her to hide it behind a sofa.

Irene attempts to listen to the radio, but hears "doorbells, elevator bells, electric razors," and other domestic sounds. She realizes that the radio is transmitting sound from other apartments in the building instead of playing music. When Jim attempts to use the radio, the same thing happens; he hears a conversation, ringing telephones, and other forms of "interference." He tells Irene he will call a repairman to fix their new radio.

The next morning, after the radio has been repaired, Irene turns it on to hear a recording of the "**Missouri Waltz**" playing over and over again. Jim comes home later that night, and he and Irene listen to the radio during dinner. Suddenly, a man's voice interrupts the music, and the Westcotts overhear a fight between a man and a woman named Kathy; Kathy's piano playing annoys the man, especially after a long day at work. Jim believes the interaction is simply a radio play, but Irene asks him to turn the radio to another station; another conversation is transmitted through the loudspeaker. Jim changes stations twice more, and two other conversations are broadcasted through the Westcotts' living room.

Jim still believes that it is "impossible" for the radio to transmit their neighbors' conversations, but Irene eventually recognizes multiple voices. She asks him to deliberately search for one set of neighbors, and they begin to make a game of it; in the process, they overhear many private conversations, including a "bitter family quarrel" over finances. Due to this new insight into their peers' shortcomings, the Westcotts go to bed self-satisfied, smug, and "weak with laughter."

The next day, Irene deliberately eavesdrops on her neighbors, and overhears scenes of "carnal love, abysmal vanity, faith, and despair." As Irene is seemingly a "simple and sheltered" woman, the radio's revelations distress her. When she gets into her building's elevator with some neighbors, she is suddenly mistrustful: she looks into her neighbors' faces and wonders what secrets they are hiding. When Irene's friend meets her for lunch, Irene even questions whether her friend is concealing something in order to appear normal.

Irene comes home to eavesdrop further, and "the intensity" of the overheard conversations increases; eventually, by the time Jim returns from work, Irene has become thoroughly disenchanted by her neighbors' constant secrecy and deception. While on a walk with Jim later that night, she tells Jim that the street musicians seem "so much nicer" than the people in the Westcotts' social circle.

The next night, Jim enters the apartment to find Irene in tears; Irene, who is inconsolable, reveals that their neighbor, Mr. Osborn, is beating his wife. She begs Jim to confront Mr. Osborne over the abuse, as she is unable to stomach society's tacit code of silence. Instead of intervening, however, Jim turns the radio off—offering Irene the choice to stop listening and thereby feign ignorance of Mr. Osborn's cruelty. Despite Irene's initial desire to save Ms. Osborn from danger, she ultimately acquiesces to Jim's suggestion and lets the radio remain turned off. She then recounts a litany of their neighbors' problems: she highlights how the Hutchinsons, another set of neighbors, cannot afford hospital treatments for a relative, and lists the various affairs, quarrels, and anxieties of the building's other tenants. Irene then asks Jim to confirm that their family, in comparison, is "good and decent and loving." Jim answers that the Westcott family is happy.

The next day, another repairman fixes the radio. Irene turns it on, and is relieved that the neighbors' discussions are no longer being broadcast. When Jim returns home, however, he looks distressed and announces that the radio is actually more than the family can afford. He then asks why Irene has lied to him about her unpaid "clothing bills." He claims that he "worries about money a great deal," and feels as if his life's efforts are "wasted." Irene, distressed that the neighbors will overhear their fight, wants him to speak quietly; Jim, however, becomes fed up with her behavior, and asks why she is acting so self-righteously. He lists numerous cruel things Irene has done, including stealing her mother's jewelry, withholding money from her sister, and visiting an "abortionist."

As Jim continues to shout, Irene clings to the radio's dial, hoping to hear something comforting. Instead, a voice on the radio broadcasts a news bulletin, repeats statistics about a railroad disaster, and describes the weather.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Irene Westcott – Irene Westcott, the protagonist of the story, is a stay-at-home mother of two who lives a seemingly

comfortable, middle-class life in New York City. Like her husband, Jim Westcott, Irene is a secret lover of music, and often listens to a radio at home; when Jim buys a **new radio** to replace their malfunctioning, older model, Irene quickly realizes that the radio is capable of tuning into the neighbors' apartments. She eagerly uses the radio to eavesdrop on the conversations of the building's other tenants, and is equally shocked and elated to discover the secrets being concealed by her otherwise respectable neighbors. At first, Irene uses the radio's revelations to reinforce her belief in her family's superiority; she believes that, unlike her neighbors, *her* family is financially comfortable, respectful, and loving. Gradually, however, she becomes mistrustful and despondent as she realizes that her peers are concerned with maintaining appearances and preserving their fabricated respectability. Irene is not initially aware that she, too, possesses similarly shallow priorities. Eventually, however, Irene's despondency triggers a confrontation with Jim, and he highlights her hypocrisy: he enumerates the various cruelties she has committed and kept hidden to preserve her respectable façade, and reveals how her sense of superiority is unearned. Equally shaken by Jim's condemnation and the fear that the neighbors might overhear their fight, Irene feels ashamed: she turns to the radio for solace, but ultimately remains acutely self-aware of her ill-gotten social respectability. Though Irene momentarily attempts to break through the barriers of social decorum when she hears Mr. Osborne beating his wife through the radio, she demurs when Jim simply shuts the radio off. She thus ultimately bows to the societal pressure to maintain appearances and avoids confrontation at the cost of her empathy.

Jim Westcott – Jim Westcott, the husband of Irene Westcott, is an avid music lover and the sole breadwinner of the Westcott family. His attire, mannerisms, and cultivated naivety allow him to appear and act younger than his years. Jim purchases a new $400 **radio** for the apartment, and is initially skeptical when Irene insists that the radio is broadcasting their neighbors' conversations. Eventually, however, Jim and Irene are captivated by the radio's eavesdropping abilities, and listen to their peers' quarrels and conversations with delight and self-satisfaction. Still, Jim is less susceptible to the radio than Irene, as he spends much of his time at work; he is therefore not privy to the pervasiveness of his neighbors' fakery. As Irene grows progressively more mistrustful of her peers, Jim tells her to stop listening to the radio, which would allow her to remain ignorant of the neighbors' struggles and their attempts to preserve their reputations. Instead, Irene continues to use the neighbors' secrets and quarrels to justify her sense of self-righteousness, which leads Jim to confront Irene with both her past sins and their family's financial instability. Jim, unwilling to remain complicit in Irene's self-deceptive fantasies, therefore forces Irene to acknowledge her misguided, hypocritical attempts at maintaining appearances. Just like the new radio, Jim acts as a catalyst for Irene's self-awareness and lost innocence. When, after hearing Mr. Osborne beating his wife through the radio, Irene begs Jim to intervene, Jim refuses; instead, he turns off the radio, illustrating his desire to remain ignorant of the problems around him and his unwillingness to engage in confrontation, even when doing so would help someone in need.

Mr. Osborn – Mr. Osborn, who lives in apartment 16-C, is a neighbor of Jim and Irene Westcott. When Irene uses the **radio** to eavesdrop on the apartment, she realizes that Mr. Osborn is abusing his wife. Overhearing Mr. Osborn's assault on his wife prompts Irene into action; for the first time, Irene wishes to break the tacit societal code of privacy in order to intervene on her neighbor's behalf. Ultimately, however, Irene chooses to leave Mr. Osborn's domestic abuse unreported. Irene's aborted response to Mr. Osborn's behavior demonstrates her priorities: she prizes social respectability over decency, and is unwilling to draw attention to problems in her community.

The Hutchinsons – The Hutchinsons are Jim and Irene Westcott's neighbors. Mrs. Hutchinson, the wife, has a sick mother who cannot receive proper medical treatment due to insufficient funds. Irene uses the Hutchinsons' financial strife to reinforce her belief in her family's superiority; unlike the Hutchinsons, Irene feels that her family does not need to worry about money.

Irene's Friend – Irene's interaction with her friend, who remains unnamed, illustrates Irene's increasing awareness of the world and her realization that everyone is concerned with maintaining appearances. As Irene listens to the **radio** and becomes more knowledgeable about the secrets left unspoken amongst her social circle, she starts to realize how highly other people value their reputation and their respectability.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Miss Armstrong – Miss Armstrong is a nurse to the Sweeneys' children; the Sweeneys are neighbors of the Westcotts. Irene realizes that the **radio** is broadcasting their neighbors' conversations when she recognizes Miss Armstrong's voice singing to the Sweeney children.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

APPEARANCES, REALITY, AND SOCIAL RESPECTABILITY

In Cheever's "The Enormous Radio," Jim and Irene Westcott are a middle class married whose new **radio** unexpectedly allows them to eavesdrop on their neighbors' interactions. The radio reveals that the Westcotts' seemingly well-to-do neighbors are hiding numerous secrets, and Irene begins to recognize that many people around her, including her friends, wish to preserve their social standing above all else. As a result of this realization, Irene becomes distrustful. Eventually Irene attempts to break this tacit code of secrecy by interfering in her neighbors' lives; ultimately, however, even Irene yields to the pressure of maintaining the status quo. Cheever's portrait of a community obsessed with appearances illustrates how peoples' outward behavior is often deeply at odds with reality—and how the pressure to adhere to unspoken rules of social respectability can triumph over truth.

From the beginning, the story's characters actively attempt to present an air of normalcy. The Westcotts' display secrecy even in innocuous circumstances in order to preserve their reputation. They are introduced as a decidedly average couple, an image they are clearly concerned with upholding. They differ from those around them "only in an interest they shared in serious music," yet the narrator points out that they "seldom mention" this passion to their friends or neighbors. Although the Westcotts' love of music does not harm anyone, Jim and Irene specifically choose not to reveal it; they seem unwilling to draw any attention to themselves whatsoever.

Like the Westcotts, other characters are also hiding secrets. When the Westcotts begin to use their new radio to eavesdrop on their neighbors, they overhear, among other things, "a monologue on salmon fishing" and "a bitter family quarrel" about money. These various revelations indicate how *everyone* in their community keeps some subjects to themselves, whether these are merely personal interests or serious problems. The range of these secrets illustrates the community's widespread aversion to rocking the societal boat in the slightest. By prioritizing appearances, everyone in the apartment building, including the Westcotts, becomes incapable of genuinely knowing those around them.

What's more, as Irene becomes more aware of secrecy's ubiquity, she becomes increasingly distraught. She uses the radio to listen in on "demonstrations" of "carnal love, abysmal vanity, faith, and despair." As she is a "simple and sheltered" woman, these overheard revelations "shock" her. She feels "troubled" and "astonished," indicating that the breadth of her neighbors' secrecy feels overwhelming to her. Inevitably, Irene's turmoil begins to manifest as mistrust: for example, when she gets into her building's elevator, she looks at the women assembled and notes their "impassive faces," and wonders "which one" had "overdrawn her bank account." Irene then has lunch with her friend, and wonders about the "secrets" this friend might be keeping. Irene now realizes that even the people closest to her—such as her friend—maintain appearances to appear untroubled.

Ironically, Irene does not rebel against societal norms despite her growing awareness of her peers' fixation on social standing. For example, when Irene and Jim go out to dinner, she does not mention the neighbors' secrets; instead, she merely seems "sad and vague," and comments that the street musicians are "so much nicer" than everyone else. In this way, she chooses to leave her concerns unvoiced despite her deepening cynicism. She avoids telling Jim the truth directly, and thus maintains the status quo: she chooses to leave difficult truths unspoken in order to keep her family's life—and her husband's understanding of others—uncomplicated.

Eventually, however, the constant secrecy overwhelms Irene. When she overhears one of her neighbors, Mr. Osborn, assaulting his wife, she asks her husband to "go up there and stop him," beseeching him to break the bounds of social decorum to reveal Mr. Osborn's cruelty. For a moment, Irene becomes willing to overlook society's tacit code of silence in order to protect a neighbor—thereby valuing, if momentarily, truth over appearances.

In response, however, Jim turns off the radio and tells her she does not "have to listen." By switching off the radio, Jim offers Irene the option to maintain the status quo. Irene, realizing that ignorance is easier than action, takes this easy choice and switches the topic: she asks Jim not to "quarrel with" her and starts "sobbing." In taking Jim's suggestion, Irene chooses to ignore the dark secrets in her community, and maintain a false equilibrium among her neighbors. Ultimately, it seems, Irene finds it easier to pretend everything is normal than to stir up controversy. The Westcotts, who are unwilling to tarnish others' good opinion of them, therefore choose to maintain a façade of respectability. Cheever's story thus illustrates how preserving one's social standing often prevails over truth and empathy.

SELF-DECEPTION AND HYPOCRISY

In "The Enormous Radio," Jim and Irene Westcott own a **radio** that allows them to eavesdrop on their neighbors' various exploits. The Westcotts themselves seem to be an average family, content and untroubled; as the story continues, however, it becomes evident that Jim and Irene often deceive themselves and each other by pretending that they do not share any of the struggles of their peers. Despite believing, erroneously, that they are better than those around them, Irene and Jim are revealed to be perilously self-delusional. Cheever's story thus illustrates not only the danger of maintaining false appearances to deflect others' prying eyes, but the perils of lying to *oneself*. The story ultimately suggests that individuals who practice such self-

deception are often deeply flawed and must actively fool themselves in order to maintain their hypocritical belief in their social superiority.

From the beginning of the story, there are hints that the Westcotts lie to themselves in order to feel superior to those around them. At first, Irene and Jim seem to be the quintessential middle-class family: they "seem to strike" a "satisfactory average of income, endeavor, and respectability." The details of their life together are presented like the "statistical reports in college alumni bulletins," a description that emphasizes the superficial nature of their happiness. Yet Jim is then revealed to be someone who is "intentionally naïve," and who, despite his older appearance, still feels "younger" than his age. His wife Irene wears "a coat of fitch," which is "dyed to resemble mink." The Westcotts are thus presented as *willfully* self-deceptive: Jim actively cultivates an air of innocence to feel younger, and Irene dyes her clothing to look more expensive and feel richer.

This tendency to be dishonest is reflected when the Westcotts realize that their new radio lets them overhear their neighbors' conversations. They initially lie to themselves about what they are hearing: Jim believes it is "impossible" for the radio to broadcast such conversations. As the Westcotts eavesdrop on their neighbors' problems, however, their pride in their carefree life overrides their skepticism. They become "weak with laughter," implying that they not only listen to but in fact *revel* in their neighbors' struggles. Despite the seeming impossibility of a magical radio, the broadcasts fuel the Westcotts' fantasy of superiority and good fortune, and they begin to rejoice in the seeming confirmation that they're better than everyone else.

Gleeful and smug, Irene deliberately seeks out more of the neighbors' quarrels, which allows her to judge her their dysfunctional lifestyles. She then insists that the Westcotts' lifestyle is picturesque in comparison, and uses the radio to justify this self-deception. For example, Irene tells Jim that their neighbors have been "quarrelling all day." She points out that everyone is "worried about money," and calls one of her neighbors—who replays a recording of the **Missouri Waltz** during her trysts—a "whore." The radio, which has exposed Irene to unsavory scenarios from her neighbors' lives, has provided Irene with a basis of comparison by which to measure and overrate her own lifestyle. Unable to resist comparing herself to others, Irene then says that the Westcotts have "never been like" their neighbors, and insists that they are "good and decent." She asks Jim to confirm that they are not "hypercritical or worried about money or dishonest." Irene reinforces her romanticized perspective by comparing it to what she has overheard; Irene believes *her* family, unlike others, is free from worry and marital strife.

Irene's self-delusion is, however, eventually challenged by accusations from Jim. Despite Jim and Irene's overinflated sense of self-worth, Jim's confrontation reveals how the Westcotts' behavior is just as flawed—and their problems just as sordid—as anyone else's. Jim eventually confesses that the radio cost "a good deal more" money than the Westcotts can afford; he then accuses Irene of lying about paying her "clothing bills." Irene, unwilling to admit to the deception, claims she did not tell him because she did not want to "worry" him. Irene has so thoroughly bought into her fantasy of financial security that she avoids the truth: she claims her lie is meant to protect Jim, when in actuality her bills are unpaid because her family is in dire financial straits.

Additionally, Jim admits that he has not "done as well" as he had "hoped to do." He claims that he worries "about money a great deal" and says he is "not at all sure of the future." In admitting this, Jim breaks any illusion of the Westcotts' superiority: the Westcotts, despite dismissing their neighbors' financial quarrels, also fight about money. Their problems are exacerbated, however, by their ongoing deflection. By believing that they are more stable than their neighbors—and lying to each other to maintain this fantasy—the Westcotts have, in fact, worsened their financial situation.

Jim then lashes out at Irene and lists her disreputable actions, which include stealing her "mother's jewelry" and financially abandoning her sister. Jim reveals how Irene's behavior is disgraceful, thereby eroding Irene's ability to lie to herself about her "virtue." She can no longer compare herself to her neighbors, as she has committed cruel and despicable acts, and is not the virtuous woman she believes herself to be.

The radio, then, serves as a tool to reveal the Westcotts' deep hypocrisy. This gradual revelation illustrates how self-deception is often used to reinforce a sense of unearned superiority. Moreover, the story also demonstrates that self-delusion is, ultimately, an untenable way to maintain self-worth: eventually, the fantasy of superiority will butt up against reality, and will shatter.

INNOCENCE, IGNORANCE, AND KNOWLEDGE

Irene and Jim Westcott are a sheltered couple who have constructed picturesque lives by choosing to remain ignorant of certain harsh truths. A new **radio**, however, reveals secrets about their neighbors and exposes the Westcotts' to the stark realities and moral dilemmas of others'—and, eventually, their own—lives. Ultimately, the radio forces the Westcotts to end their constructed sense of innocence: it catalyzes a fight that reveals their own unspoken, terrible secrets. In Cheever's story, knowledge forces individuals to abandon their willful ignorance and to become irrevocably self-aware. What's more, once innocence and ignorance are lost, they can never be regained.

From the beginning of the story, Cheever contrasts the the

radio, a symbol of knowledge and communication, with the Westcotts' deliberate obliviousness. Irene Westcott has a "forehead upon which nothing at all had been written," a description that emphasizes her guilelessness: she is seemingly unaware of—and unmarred by—stress. Jim is described as an "earnest" man who wears "the kind of clothes his class had worn at Andover," a boarding school. Jim deliberately dresses like a schoolboy, as a way of playing up his childlike qualities. The Westcotts have cultivated their appearance to seem innocent, in order to emphasize their unawareness of the world and its pressures.

When the Westcotts purchase a new radio, however, the machine acts as a corrective to the Westcotts' calculated naivety. It "stands among [their] intimate possessions like an aggressive intruder," illustrating how the radio interferes with the Westcotts "carefully" curated image. Irene then adds that "violent forces" seem "snared" in the radio; her portrayal hints further at how the radio is a disturbance to the Westcotts' peace. The radio's description implies its ability to disrupt the cultivated tranquility of the Westcotts' life and home. Additional descriptions of the radio emphasize its omniscience and power. The radio seems to possess a "sensitivity to discord," indicating that it perceives and thrives on the chaos of the outside world. Furthermore, the radio is described as something that cannot be mastered; this description illustrates how the radio, again a means of communication and awareness, is an inescapable transmitter of knowledge and "discord."

Irene's "life" before the radio is purposefully "simple and sheltered," but when the radio exposes the problems faced by her neighbors, her outlook changes. She hears "brutal language," which "astonishe[s] and trouble[s] her." Moreover, the radio makes Irene increasingly mistrustful: when she has lunch with a friend, she wonders about her friend's hidden secrets. Irene's innocence, however cultivated, has been erased by her exposure to the radio. Even her most personal relationships, which she had not questioned previously, have become doubt-ridden.

Eventually, Irene overhears her neighbor Mr. Osborn "beating his wife." She exclaims that "life is too terrible, too sordid," illustrating how the radio has destroyed her carefree worldview. She attempts to cling to her prior ignorance, and begs Jim to confirm that, unlike their neighbors, they are "good and decent and loving." Despite Jim's reassurance, however, Irene has become inescapably aware of her peers' cruelty. As a result of this newfound knowledge, Irene begins to change her behavior. Jim notes how Irene acts "sad and vague," and highlights her unfamiliar "look of radiant melancholy." Irene's sadness demonstrates how her purposefully "simple" life has changed; the radio has erased her willful ignorance, and introduced her to the quagmire of others' lives.

The awareness Irene has gained from the radio is ultimately a burden. It prompts Irene to think not only about her neighbors' lives, but also her own. Unfortunately for Irene, this introspection is inescapable; nevertheless, she attempts to return to her previous, oblivious behavior. For example, Irene asks Jim to confirm that, unlike her troubled neighbors, they are "happy." Moreover, when she is given the opportunity to relinquish the radio's power, she takes it gladly: a handyman fixes the radio, and Irene is "happy" to hear the radio playing "Beethoven's Ninth Symphony." The radio's repair provides a false sense of reprieve: it frees Irene from hearing about her neighbors, but cannot entirely return her to a state of ignorance.

This momentary respite does not last. Jim, angered by Irene's behavior, starts a fight, and it is revealed that Irene's obliviousness is an act cultivated to hide her past behavior. After telling Irene that he cannot maintain their lavish lifestyle, Jim confronts her about her supposed "virtue," and claims he will "never forget" how she withheld money from her sister and stole her mother's jewelry. The radio has forced Irene into a confrontation with Jim that destroys her pretense of innocence, and prevents her return to an easygoing state of unawareness. In this way, Cheever complicates the dynamic between knowledge, innocence, and ignorance: cognizance of others' pain forces an individual to become less ignorant of the world, but ultimately, it is *self-awareness* that erases one's innocence for good.

Distraught by this new self-awareness, Irene attempts—and fails—to reclaim her prior naivety one last time: she listens to the radio "hoping" it will "speak to her kindly." Instead, the radio announces that a "railroad disaster in Tokyo" killed "twenty-nine people," offering another dark view of the world. The radio then refuses to offer her respite, symbolizing the inexorable end of her innocence.

In Cheever's story, then, the Westcotts are initially portrayed as characters who have cultivated an unwitting, protected worldview. Eventually, their new radio exposes the Westcotts to their neighbors' struggles, and forces a confrontation between Irene and Jim that reveals Irene's ruthlessness. Cheever's story thus illustrates how willful innocence and ignorance cannot be maintained in the face of dawning knowledge and self-awareness.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE RADIO

The new radio that Jim and Irene Westcott buy comes to represent the power—and danger—of peeking into others' lives. This radio is a malevolent, chaotic presence; Irene considers it an intruder, and she highlights its

ugly and predatory aspects, such as its eerie green light. Soon after the radio's entrance into their household, Jim and Irene realize that the radio is broadcasting their neighbors' conversations instead of playing music. Irene is quickly enthralled by the radio's eavesdropping capabilities, and deliberately uses the radio to invade the privacy of her neighbors. As she discovers hidden truths about the people in her social circle, however, she realizes that most of her acquaintances are concealing terrible secrets in order to maintain their respectability. Additionally, Jim and Irene eventually get into an argument over the radio's influence; this argument, in turn, reveals the lies and cruel deeds Irene has kept hidden to maintain appearances.

The radio, therefore, provides Irene with knowledge of her neighbors' darkest secrets and, ultimately, forces her to confront her *own* hypocrisy and ignorance. Irene initially acts self-righteous and superior when she hears about her neighbors' struggles, but her newfound knowledge eventually leads to painful realizations about both herself and others. Furthermore, the radio illustrates the inescapability of truth. Despite the Westcotts' hope to seem normal and untroubled—a hope shared by their neighbors, who act in equally dishonest and insincere ways—the radio eventually reveals the truth about everyone, including its owners.

THE MISSOURI WALTZ

The Missouri Waltz that repeatedly plays on the Westcotts' new **radio** represents a loss of innocence and of ignorance. The song first appears in the story after the Westcotts hire a handyman to repair their new radio, which has been broadcasting the sounds and conversations of their neighbors. Initially, Irene believes the radio has been fixed, as she hears a scratchy recording of the Missouri Waltz; the recording reminds Irene of music she heard during her childhood vacations. When the waltz ends, she expects to hear an accompanying description of the song; instead, the recording merely repeats. Irene hears the song again when one of her neighbors hums the tune in the elevator. Later in the story, Irene calls that same neighbor a loose woman, implying that her neighbor often plays the song while she entertains her partners.

To Irene, the Missouri Waltz represents a twofold loss of innocence: the song both reminds her of childhood scenes that have faded into memory, and represents her gradual awareness of her peers' immoral behavior. Irene is notably described as a naïve character; as such, the corruption of the waltz—from a song of her youth into something associated with sexual indiscretion—emphasizes a certain disillusionment as she begins to see the reality of the world around her. The waltz's missing description also illustrates an additional element of this lost innocence: its inexplicability. Irene is not given a rationale for—nor an explanation of—the terrible revelations she hears on the radio; rather, she is simply exposed to her peers' faults, problems, and sins, and must acclimate to this unexpected knowledge without help or clarification.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Stories of John Cheever* published in 2000.

The Enormous Radio Quotes

Jim and Irene Westcott were the kind of people who seem to strike that satisfactory average of income, endeavor, and respectability that is reached by the statistical reports in college alumni bulletins. They were the parents of two young children, they had been married nine years, they lived on the twelfth floor of an apartment house near Sutton Place, they went to the theatre on an average of 10.3 times a year, and they hoped someday to live in Westchester.

Related Characters: Jim Westcott, Irene Westcott

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, which opens the story, Jim and Irene Westcott are introduced as a seemingly picturesque and prototypical couple. The statistics used to describe the Westcotts' life further illustrate the couple's air of untroubled perfection. They are in a stable, long-term marriage, maintain an unvarying theater habit, and have a typical, middle-class dream of moving to the suburbs. Their lifestyle is worthy of "alumni bulletins," implying that the Westcotts are socially respectable according to educated society's standards. However, the descriptions of the Westcotts also hint at their worldly ignorance and naivety: their existence serves as an exemplar solely for their fellow "college alumni" and middle-class aspirants.

Additionally, the Westcotts only "seem" to reach the "average" level of "respectability," suggesting that there their enviable life is, in actuality, not actually all that respectable. In fact, much of the passage's language introduces a tone of subtle doubt: the Westcotts are "the kind of people" that only "seem" to embody an idealized vision of happiness and security. The initial depiction of the Westcotts, therefore, foreshadows a discrepancy between reality and false appearances.

> Irene Westcott was a pleasant, rather plain girl with [...] a wide, fine forehead upon which nothing at all had been written [...] You could not say that Jim Westcott looked younger than he was, but you could at least say of him that he seemed to feel younger. He [...] dressed in the kind of clothes his class had worn at Andover, and his manner was earnest, vehement, and intentionally naïve. The Westcotts differed from their friends, their classmates, and their neighbors only in an interest they shared in serious music. They went to a great many concerts—although they seldom mentioned this to anyone—and they spent a good deal of time listening to the music on the radio.

Related Characters: Jim Westcott, Irene Westcott

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

This passage early in the story reveals the personas that Jim and Irene have constructed for themselves. Irene's forehead has "nothing" written upon it: this description implies her ignorance of the worlds' pressures, and demonstrates her preservation of an untroubled, unstressed appearance. Jim, despite his older appearance, acts younger than his age and dresses in the clothes of his college years. His "manner" is also "intentionally naïve," a deliberate acknowledgment of his innocent façade.

Importantly, these constructed details are all external, revealing that the Westcotts are the type of people who fixate on appearances rather than interiority or genuine personality traits. These details suggest that both Irene and Jim have purposefully crafted a youthful, innocent image.

Furthermore, it is revealed that the Westcotts only differ from their peers in one aspect: they are "serious music" lovers. Instead of embracing this distinctive quality, however, they hide their enthusiasm by refusing to discuss the concerts they attend and listening to their music in private. The Westcotts do not wish to seem different in any way: instead, they conceal this personality quirk. This decision illustrates their desire to fit in with their social circle, and to preserve their reputation as a normal, average couple.

> She was struck at once with the physical ugliness of the large gumwood cabinet. Irene was proud of her living room, she had chosen its furnishings and colors as carefully as she chose her clothes, and now it seemed to her that the new radio stood among her intimate possessions like an aggressive intruder [... the radio] filled the apartment with the noise of music amplified so mightily that it knocked a china ornament from a table to the floor [...] The violent forces that were snared in the ugly gumwood cabinet made her uneasy.

Related Characters: Irene Westcott

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 33-34

Explanation and Analysis

This passage introduces the radio into the Westcotts' household. Irene's description of the radio emphasizes its repulsiveness and incongruity: it seems like an antagonistic "intruder" in her home. In addition to painting the radio as an invasive, outside force, Irene's thinking further reveals her fixation on appearances; her home, like her clothing, has been curated with care. In this way, Irene indirectly exposes her all-consuming preoccupation with reputation and respectability: every aspect of her existence, from home decor to her wardrobe, is chosen to illustrate her good taste and enviable style.

The radio, in comparison, is a disruptive force that interrupts the stability of the Westcotts' home. When Irene first turns the radio on, it plays music so loudly that it breaks an "ornament," representing the radio's ability to shatter and disturb the couple's picturesque world. Moreover, Irene admits to feeling "uneasy" about the radio's "violent forces"—this implies that Irene is aware that her innocent outlook may not withstand the radio's broadcasts, which convey violence and discord.

Jim was too tired to make even a pretense of sociability, and there was nothing about the dinner to hold Irene's interest [...] She listened for a few minutes to a Chopin prelude and then was surprised to hear a man's voice break in. "For Christ's sake, Kathy," he said, "do you always have to play the piano when I get home?" The music stopped abruptly. "It's the only chance I have," a woman said. "I'm at the office all day." "So am I," the man said. He added something obscene about an upright piano, and slammed a door. The passionate and melancholy music began again.

"Did you hear that?" Irene asked. [...]

"It's probably a play."

Related Characters: Jim Westcott, Irene Westcott (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 35-36

Explanation and Analysis

This passage reveals minor imperfections in the Westcotts' relationship, while also introducing the radio as an object of communication, knowledge, and awareness. After work, Jim is unable to maintain a "pretense of sociability" with Irene; this is the first indication that Jim and Irene's relationship is not as picturesque as it initially seems. Irene, who is bored by the situation, is equally unable to maintain the pretense of wifely devotion. Despite their façade of marital contentedness—a point of pride, and a symbol of their normalcy—Jim and Irene show signs of being dissatisfied with one another.

To fill the silence, Jim and Irene listen to the radio, which broadcasts an overheard argument between a man and a woman. The argument, which describes a scene of marital tension, foreshadows the type of content that the Westcotts will be continually exposed to by the radio. From this first exposure, the radio is established as an instrument of worldly knowledge; it reveals hidden, emotionally fraught information capable of disrupting the Westcotts' (somewhat feigned) peace and ignorance.

Moreover, Jim's dismissal of the broadcast illustrates his desire to remain deliberately unaware. At first, he is unwilling to believe that the radio is eavesdropping—as this would make him a witness to others' problems—and instead pretends the fight is scripted. Even in innocuous circumstances, Jim lies to himself to maintain his untroubled persona.

"Those must be the Fullers, in 11-E," Irene said. "I knew they were giving a party this afternoon. I saw her in the liquor store. Isn't this too divine? Try something else. See if you can get those people in 18-C."

The Westcotts overheard that evening a monologue on salmon fishing in Canada, a bridge game, running comments on home movies of what had apparently been a fortnight at Sea Island, and a bitter family quarrel about an overdraft at the bank. They turned off their radio at midnight and went to bed, weak with laughter.

Related Characters: Irene Westcott (speaker), Jim Westcott

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Irene and Jim quickly put aside their wariness and confusion in order to enjoy the radio's unexpected capabilities. Irene is overjoyed to hear the radio confirm details about her neighbors: despite Irene's apparent ignorance of others' lives—she seems more fixated on her own—she is revealed here to actually be a very nosy neighbor. The radio, therefore, exposes the more unsavory characteristics behind Irene's naïve façade, such as her love of gossip. Additionally, the radio provides Irene with knowledge of the world: it broadcasts her neighbors' secrets and hidden quirks, and feeds her information that fuels her sense of superiority.

Irene's unearned feeling of greatness is revealed by her response to the radio's revelations: when she overhears conversations that expose her neighbors' problems and hidden interests, she laughs with her husband. Irene and Jim are self-satisfied and derisive after hearing their neighbors' private affairs, instead of sympathizing or turning off the radio out of respect for their peers' privacy.

Irene shifted the control and invaded the privacy of several breakfast tables. She overheard demonstrations of indigestion, carnal love, abysmal vanity, faith, and despair. Irene's life was nearly as simple and sheltered as it appeared to be, and the forthright and sometimes brutal language that came from the loudspeaker that morning astonished and troubled her. She continued to listen until her maid came in. Then she turned off the radio quietly, since this insight, she realized, was a furtive one.

Related Characters: Irene Westcott

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Irene, intrigued by the radio's capabilities, begins to deliberately seek out the conversations and secrets of her neighbors. The radio reveals the neighbors' complicated, emotional lives; in this way, it provides knowledge that negates Irene's attempts at cultivating a carefree existence. Despite actively building a life that is deliberately "sheltered" and easygoing, Irene's voracious curiosity and outright nosiness—magnified and aided by the radio—indicates that her sense of ignorance is fading. Additionally, her eagerness to use the radio to seek gossip is at odds with her earnest, outward persona. In this way, the radio unveils two types of truths: those hidden by her peers, as well as those hidden beneath Irene's mask of simplicity and naivete.

Hearing about her neighbors' "vanity" and love affairs fuels Irene's fantasies of superiority, and allows her to judge her peers for their flaws. Still, the maintenance of her self-delusional superiority comes at a price: while the radio provides her with gossip, she still feels "troubled" by what she hears, and begins to alter her behavior in order to hide her transgressions. Irene, realizing that her new hobby is "furtive," decides to conceal it from her maid. Despite recognizing the pervasiveness of secrets, Irene continues to uphold appearances, indicating that she has not learned any moral lessons from the radio: even as her willful innocence begins to erode, she acts as superficially as ever.

❝ Irene had a luncheon date with a friend that day, and she left her apartment at a little after twelve. There were a number of women in the elevator when it stopped at her floor. She stared at their handsome and impassive faces, their furs, and the cloth flowers in their hats […] Which one had overdrawn her bank account? […] Irene had two Martinis at lunch, and she looked searchingly at her friend and wondered what her secrets were. They had intended to go shopping after lunch, but Irene excused herself and went home.

Related Characters: Irene's Friend, Irene Westcott

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37-38

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Irene's constant eavesdropping and thirst for gossip extends into the world beyond the radio. When she gets into the elevator with her neighbors, she is immediately distrustful and suspicious; this reaction reveals how thoroughly the radio's revelations have altered her behavior. Previously, Irene trusted her neighbors, and deliberately aspired to be their equals—or their superiors—in terms of social respectability. Now, however, her worldview has been damaged and distorted by the radio's revelations. In this way, the knowledge provided by the radio has replaced naivety with cynicism.

In fact, the pervasiveness of deception has forced Irene to reconsider and question even her closest relationships. While eating lunch with her friend, Irene wonders whether this friend, too, is hiding "secrets" to seem normal. The radio has forced Irene to acknowledge that she is not the only image-conscious person in her social circle, and prompted her to realize that *everyone* is capable of hiding secrets and faking normalcy.

In this way, the knowledge provided by the radio has deconstructed Irene's self-centered ignorance of the world and her peers. She is now painfully aware of the universality of secrets, and cynical of everyone's motives.

❝ A Salvation Army band was on the corner playing "Jesus Is Sweeter." Irene drew on her husband's arm and held him there for a minute, to hear the music. "They're really such nice people, aren't they?" she said. "They have such nice faces. Actually, they're so much nicer than a lot of the people we know" […] Irene looked up at the spring stars. "'How far that little candle throws its beams,'" she exclaimed. "'So shines a good deed in a naughty world.'"

Related Characters: Irene Westcott (speaker), Jim Westcott

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38-39

Explanation and Analysis

Irene makes this comment while walking to dinner with Jim. This moment reveals that the cynicism Irene feels when interacting with her neighbors and friends has turned into an overall sense of doubt about humanity's kindness and

authenticity. Even when interacting with strangers, Irene's newfound knowledge disheartens her; the innocence and naivety she has actively constructed to shield herself from self-awareness has faded due to the radio's influence.

Irene's new awareness does not, ironically, turn her into a genuine and open person. Rather, she continues to prize appearances and normalcy above all else, and persists in her fantasies of superiority. For example, instead of sharing her concerns about the neighbors' deception with Jim directly, she only hints at the source of her distrust. In this way, she maintains her calm and untroubled persona, as she does not want to introduce tension into her marriage over their peers' problems.

Additionally, she compliments unknown musicians for being nicer than her peers. By valuing strangers' kindness over the decency of her own neighbors, Irene seems to be reinforcing her own sense of superiority: she is judging her neighbors for their lies, and acting sanctimonious about their faults. Irene even quotes a passage from Shakespeare to emphasize how highly she values generosity and decency; paradoxically, though, she demonstrates neither of these traits.

"Mr. Osborn's beating his wife. They've been quarreling since four o'clock, and now he's hitting her. Go up there and stop him."

[...] "You know you don't have to listen to this sort of thing," he said [...]

"Don't, don't, don't, don't quarrel with me," she moaned, and laid her head on his shoulder. "All the others have been quarreling all day. Everybody's been quarreling. They're all worried about money. Mrs. Hutchinson's mother is dying of cancer in Florida and they don't have enough money [...] and that girl who plays the 'Missouri Waltz' is a whore, a common whore, and the elevator man has tuberculosis and Mr. Osborn has been beating Mrs. Osborn."

Related Characters: Jim Westcott, Irene Westcott (speaker), The Hutchinsons, Mr. Osborn

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 39-40

Explanation and Analysis

The radio has revealed that one of the Westcotts' neighbors is a domestic abuser. This horrible revelation forces Irene to reconsider her priorities. Previously, Irene was disturbed by her neighbors' secrets; nevertheless, she remained unwilling to disrupt the community's peace or to expose anyone's lies outright. Once Irene learns of Mr. Osborn's terrible secret, however, she momentarily rebels against the pressure to preserve respectability. She asks Jim to act on the knowledge provided by the radio, and pleads with him to intervene in another's life in order to save an innocent person from harm. In this way, Irene's newly acquired knowledge finally prompts her into prizing truth over reputation: Jim's intervention would inevitably lead to gossip, judgment, and criticism amongst the community, but Irene urges him to intercede anyway.

Despite this momentary change of heart, however, Irene eventually reverts to her typical behavior. When Jim offers her the option to stop listening, and thereby preserve her ignorance of her neighbors' problems, she takes his suggestion. In fact, she drops the idea of rescuing Mrs. Osborn entirely; instead, she judges her neighbors for their problems and anxieties. Irene thus reaffirms her preoccupation with social respectability: even in the direst circumstances, she is unwilling to assert the truth, as this would disturb the status quo.

"But we've never been like that, have we, darling? Have we? I mean, we've always been good and decent and loving to one another, haven't we? And we have two children, two beautiful children. Our lives aren't sordid, are they, darling? Are they?" She flung her arms around his neck and drew his face down to hers. "We're happy, aren't we, darling? We are happy, aren't we?"

"Of course we're happy," he said tiredly [...]

"You love me, don't you?" she asked. "And we're not hypercritical or worried about money or dishonest, are we?"

Related Characters: Jim Westcott, Irene Westcott (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

After desperately listing off the various secrets she's learned through the radio, Irene seeks reassurance form Jim regarding their marriage. In this moment, Irene reverts to her superficial behavior and her self-deluded belief in her

family's superiority. Irene's fixation on appearances and respectability triumphs over any sense of decency: despite knowing that her peers' problems include financial insecurity, sickness, and domestic violence, Irene is unable to feign pity. In fact, she only references her neighbors' problems in order to reinforce the Westcotts' relative superiority. In this context, ironically, Irene's citation of her family's picturesque image does not demonstrate her respectability, but tarnishes it instead. Rather than seeming nobler and less troubled than her neighbors, she instead appears to be more unkind, ungenerous, and unsympathetic.

When she asks her husband to confirm her fantasies of contentedness, she further underscores her hypocrisy and self-delusion. She claims that the Westcotts are not "hypercritical," but continues to be judgmental and self-righteous. Jim agrees with Irene "tiredly," thereby implying that he is resigned to perpetuating Irene's lies. This conversation thereby reveals the inconsistencies in the Westcotts' romanticized self-image; despite their desire to maintain appearances, their words directly contradict their behavior.

> "I'm sick to death of your apprehensiveness. The radio can't hear us. Nobody can hear us. And what if they can hear us? Who cares? [...] Why are you so Christly all of a sudden? [...] You stole your mother's jewelry before they probated her will. You never gave your sister a cent of that money that was intended for her—not even when she needed it [...] where was all your piety and your virtue when you went to that abortionist? I'll never forget how cool you were."

Related Characters: Jim Westcott (speaker), Irene Westcott

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, the secrets hidden behind Irene's innocent façade are revealed, illustrating how self-awareness eventually triumphs over feigned naivety. Jim and Irene get into a fight, causing Irene to fret that the neighbors will overhear the family's problems; Jim, fed up with Irene's fixation on self-image, exposes her for her hypocrisy and unearned sense of superiority. Jim's willingness to confront Irene indicates that he no longer wishes to maintain false appearances or perpetuate fantasies. He reveals that Irene's deliberately innocent worldview is a ruse to mask secrets that are on par with the secrets hidden by the neighbors. Jim's exposure of Irene's lies demonstrates how self-deception is often practiced by individuals with the most to hide. Despite her self-righteous behavior, Irene's cruelty goes far beyond the level demonstrated by most of her neighbors.

Additionally, in this passage, Jim serves the same role as the radio: both of them act as instruments that transmit knowledge and awareness. Although the radio does not broadcast the Westcotts' secrets to others, it nevertheless serves to communicate truth by prompting a confrontation between the couple. As such, the radio illustrates how knowledge is escapable and irreversible: the Westcotts are first made aware of the troubles throughout society, and are then forced to reckon with their own faults.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE ENORMOUS RADIO

Jim Westcott and Irene Westcott, a middle-class couple with two young children, live in New York City and "seem" to "strike that satisfactory average of income, endeavor, and respectability." Jim acts "intentionally naïve," and Irene has an open and honest look about her. The Westcotts maintain a secret "interest" in "serious music," however, which sets them apart from their acquaintances.

Jim and Irene are introduced as an ideal couple, but their picturesque lifestyle is a cleverly cultivated deception. This passage takes care to establish just how unremarkable this couple is, but it will eventually become clear that both Irene and Jim actively construct their earnest, average, and carefree appearance. Additionally, they hide the one personality quirk that sets them apart from their social circle. The Westcotts, who wish to maintain their reputation of innocent contentedness, are afraid to seem abnormal or draw any attention to themselves whatsoever.

Jim and Irene often listen to a radio at home, but when their current model breaks down, Jim buys a **new radio**. Irene is immediately horrified by the "physical ugliness" of the new model, and describes the radio as an "aggressive intruder" amongst her carefully curated living room. When she turns the radio on, it glows with "malevolent" light and broadcasts at such a high volume that a "china ornament" falls onto the floor. Irene feels "uneasy" about the radio's "violent forces."

The new radio is an intimidating trespasser. That the new radio transmits broadcasts at an unexpectedly loud volume and breaks one of the delicate furnishings in the Westcotts' home implies that the radio—a transmitter of chaos and knowledge?will be a destructive force in the couple's carefully constructed life.

Later that evening, Irene turns on the **radio** again, and hears the beginning of a "Mozart quintet." Soon, however, the music is interrupted by "interference," and she hears "doorbells, elevator bells, electric razors," and other noises from the apartments around her. She realizes that the radio is transmitting her neighbors' sounds through the loudspeaker, and, recognizing that she cannot "hope to master" the machine, turns it off.

Like many characters in the story, the radio is more than it appears to be: at first, it seems ordinary, but it then reveals itself to be a sinister object. The radio's unstoppable transmissions also represent the inescapability of worldly knowledge: awareness of others is unavoidable once the radio, a relentless communicator, has entered the Westcotts' household. Irene is initially resistant to shattering her apparently blissful ignorance, however.

After work that same evening, Jim turns on the **radio** and has the same experience as Irene: the radio's volume is initially so loud that it makes the apartment shake. The radio then experiences interference, and begins to broadcast sounds from their neighbors' apartments. Jim is "unable to get rid of the noises," and turns the radio off, promising Irene that he will get it fixed.

Jim's experience with the radio is similar to Irene's: both are helpless in the face of the radio's unyielding, thunderous broadcasts. Jim's experience reinforces the idea that exposure to worldly knowledge is inevitable. Jim initially believes that he can return to the innocuous music to which he is accustomed?this return would symbolize his ability to remain ignorant of the broader world?but he is ultimately incapable of mastering the radio.

By the next afternoon, the **radio** has been fixed, and Irene turns it on to hear a rendition of the "**Missouri Waltz**," which reminds her of the music she used to hear from an "old-fashioned phonograph" during her childhood summer vacations. After the song finishes, Irene expects a brief "explanation" of the recording, but the song merely starts over again; soon after, she turns off the radio to tend to her children.

Irene's next exposure to the radio leads to a moment of nostalgia. This interaction with the radio reveals another element of its communicative powers: the radio is capable of reminding its listener of past innocence that has already been lost or eroded by time. The radio, therefore, is a communicator of both present and *past knowledge: it reveals the neighbors' conversations and evokes memories. By communicating these dual types of knowledge, and providing no explanation for its broadcasts, the radio continues to illustrate how knowledge of the world is disorienting, and oftentimes inexplicable.*

When Jim returns from work, he is "too tired" to uphold a "pretense of sociability" with Irene, who remains quiet. As they listen to the **radio**, a fight between a man and a woman interrupts the broadcast of a "Chopin prelude." Jim insists the fight is from a radio play. Jim and Irene change the radio channels multiple times, and overhear other conversations, including a neighbor's nurse, Miss Armstrong, reading a bedtime story. Jim continues to think it is "impossible" for the radio to broadcast these sounds.

Jim's inability to act socially with Irene exposes the couple's constructed appearance of marital bliss; in actuality, the couple is not completely happy. The radio's broadcast of another couple's fight only heightens this discrepancy between happy appearances and actual discontent. Moreover, this overheard fight introduces another instance in which knowledge supersedes respectability, as harmless music is overtaken by a private quarrel. Furthermore, Jim is unwilling to believe the radio is actually revealing another couple's secrets, and lies to himself in order to remain ignorant of others' problems.

Irene tells Jim to keep using the **radio**, and the couple turns to multiple radio channels. They overhear a rowdy cocktail party, and Irene begins to identify the voices with glee. Irene then asks Jim to deliberately eavesdrop on specific people, such as the neighbors in apartment 18-C. As the Westcotts continue to listen in, they overhear many private conversations, including "a bitter family quarrel" over finances. They stay up eavesdropping until midnight and go to bed "weak with laughter."

Despite the Westcotts' initial wariness, they soon enjoy the newfound knowledge transmitted by the radio. Instead of sympathizing with a couple that fights over money troubles, however, they find humor and satisfaction in remaining privy to?but unaffected by?others' anxieties. The radio's broadcasts provide useful information that erases Irene and Jim's blind ignorance of their neighbors. Ironically, however, the couple does not actually learn *from their knowledge; instead, they use it to fuel their illogical delusions of greatness and reinforce their carefree personas.*

Irene's son wakes her partway through the night for a glass of water. After retrieving the glass for him, she turns on the **radio** to overhear a conversation between a husband and wife. The husband asks if his wife is feeling well, and she tiredly responds that she "never" feels like herself. The wife then admits she is hesitant to go to another doctor, as her medical bills are already so expensive. Irene is disturbed by the "restrained melancholy" of their discussion, and goes back to bed.

Irene's continual use of the radio indicates that she is becoming accustomed to the knowledge it imparts. Still, Irene begins to realize that knowledge has its costs: it can expose the painful emotional secrets that are hidden behind cultivated appearances. When Irene eavesdrops on a woman confessing to psychological trauma, she is troubled by what she hears, and decides to return to bed to avoid losing her willful naivety entirely. In other words, she doesn't want to entirely face the issues she is now privy to.

The next morning, Irene tends to her children. Once Jim and the children leave for the day, however, she immediately turns on the **radio**, breaching the "privacy" of her neighbors' homes. She overhears another rendition of the "**Missouri Waltz**," and "demonstrations" of "carnal love, abysmal vanity, faith, and despair." As Irene's life is "simple and sheltered," she is deeply disturbed by what she hears. Still, she continues to eavesdrop, and only turns off the radio when the maid arrives.

Once again, Irene is drawn to the radio's transmissions of knowledge. As Irene is exposed to more secrets, she understands the depths of her neighbors' immorality, which erases her sense of worldly ignorance. She is troubled to hear the range of her neighbors' problems and disturbed by how differently they behave when behind closed doors. Despite this, Irene's descriptions of her peers are clearly judgmental and dismissive: she considers them vain and sexually depraved. These labels only fuel her own self-righteousness.

Irene leaves to have lunch with her friend, and gets into the elevator. The elevator is already filled with other women from the building. Irene looks at their "handsome and impassive faces," and wonders about the problems and secrets they are hiding behind their aloof expressions. Soon after, another woman enters the elevator, humming the "**Missouri Waltz**." Irene continues to wonder about secrecy as she has lunch with her friend, and looks "searchingly" at her acquaintance's face.

Eventually, exposure to the radio's revelations warps Irene's worldview. Whereas previously she was unaware of her neighbors' faults, she is now overtly mistrustful, and fixates on her peers' false appearances and hidden secrets. The knowledge Irene has gained from the radio has so thoroughly altered her perspective that she even suspects her friend of faking normalcy to maintain her reputation. Irene's naivety has rapidly eroded, and she has gained a new, painful awareness of social standing's importance.

Although Irene is scheduled to go shopping with her friend, she makes an excuse and heads home. She tells her maid to leave her undisturbed, and turns on the **radio** to listen to the neighbors' conversations. She overhears a couple scheming to sell a diamond that fell from a bracelet of one of their party guests, and hears another conversation in which a woman pushes her friend to "talk to somebody" at the party so they can stay on the invitation list.

Disoriented and overwhelmed by the pervasiveness of others' lies and fakery, Irene chooses to cancel her plans. Instead of separating herself from the radio, however, she once again eavesdrops on conversations that reveal her peers' greed and superficiality. Now that her naivety has been replaced by mistrust, she is unable to return to her state of carefree bliss. In fact, now that she is aware of how people truly behave, she seems compelled to seek out new secrets that will make her aware of further deception.

The Westcotts plan to go out for dinner with friends later that night, but Irene acts "sad and vague," so Jim brings her a drink. As the Westcotts walk towards the restaurant, they hear a "Salvation Army band" playing, and Irene comments that the musicians seem much nicer than "the people" in their apartment's social circle. Jim notes the look of unfamiliar, "radiant melancholy" on Irene's face, and comments to himself about her strange behavior at dinner. As they walk home after the meal, Irene quotes a line from Shakespeare about how "a good deed" always "shines" in a "naughty world."

Irene's new knowledge of the world has made her a cynic. Instead of revealing her feelings of mistrust to her husband, however, she makes oblique comments that hint at her true thoughts. In this way, Irene maintains an appearance of normalcy and deludes herself into thinking she is unchanged by what she has learned. In actuality, she is deeply troubled; however, she seems unwilling to disturb Jim by telling him the truth. She then recites a quote that indicates she still strongly believes that she is better and more righteous than her deceptive neighbors.

The next day, Jim arrives home to see Irene crying while she listens to the **radio**. She tells him that their neighbor, Mr. Osborn, is beating his wife, and asks Jim to go to their apartment and stop the assault. Instead, Jim shuts off the radio, and tells Irene she does not "have to listen" and can choose to turn it off. Irene exclaims that it is "dreadful," and Jim answers angrily that he bought the radio, which was rather expensive, to make her happy. Irene, distraught, asks him not to "quarrel" with her, and emphasizes that everyone around them has been "quarreling all day."

Eventually, Irene's awareness of others' cruelty triumphs over her investment in maintaining appearances. She asks Jim to intervene in a neighbor's life, implying that she is finally prioritizing truth over respectability. Jim, whose worldview has not yet been warped by the radio, instead gets frustrated with Irene. He offers her the choice to stop listening, an option that would allow her to return to a state of ignorant bliss. Irene accepts this option, once again choosing to prioritize respectability over empathy. Jim and Irene are unwilling to provoke a confrontation with the neighbors, as this could alter their social standing and disturb the community's tacit secrecy.

Irene then tells Jim that all the neighbors are "worried about money." She discusses another couple, the Hutchinsons, who cannot afford medical treatment for their relative. In tears, she labels the woman who plays the "**Missouri Waltz**" a "whore," and iterates how Mr. Osborn is a domestic abuser. Jim once again says she does not have to listen to the **radio**, and Irene leaves it turned off. Irene then exclaims, "Life is too terrible, too sordid and awful."

Irene's exposure to others' problems has eroded her ignorance, but it has not made her less superficial. She finally reveals the neighbors' worries to Jim, but is uninterested in empathizing with her peers. Instead, she tries to reinforce her sense of superiority by judging her peers harshly; she believes that her *family is more fortunate and moral. Irene acts world-weary to arouse sympathy, as she wants Jim to affirm her sense of superiority and righteousness.*

Irene asks Jim to confirm that their family lives a lifestyle that is different from their neighbors. She asks him whether they are "good and decent and loving," and then asks him to say that, unlike their peers, they are "not hypercritical or worried about money or dishonest." Jim does as Irene wishes, and "tiredly" confirms that they are happy.

In order to reinforce her self-deceptive lies, Irene asks Jim to confirm that their family is better, kinder, and more carefree than the neighbors. Irene's request reveals her investment in reputation over reality: she does not care that her peers are suffering. Instead, she is solely interested in perpetuating her fantasies of social success and normalcy.

In the morning, a repairman fixes the **radio**, and Irene is "happy to hear" normal radio programming, such as commercials and music. When Jim comes home, however, he confesses to Irene that the radio's bill was more than they can afford. He also points out that she lied to him about paying the clothing bills, as they are still on her dressing table. Irene claims she did not tell him because she did not want him to worry.

When the radio is fixed, Irene is happy to return to a state of ignorance about her neighbors. Jim's confession about the radio's price, however, shatters Irene's delusion of carefree innocence; once again, she is forced to confront truths that undermine her untroubled façade. Jim's accusations further illustrate the consequences of Irene's self-deception: she is, in fact, not as financially secure as she pretends to be, and is actually quite irresponsible with money.

Jim responds that she must get better at handling the household's finances. Jim then admits that he has not done as well as he had "hoped to do," and urges Irene to think of their children. He says that he worries about money "a great deal," and feels very unsure of the future, just like everyone else. Jim adds that he does not want to see his "energies" and his youth "wasted" on Irene's luxury purchases.

Jim continues to reveal his true feelings of insecurity, dissatisfaction, and bitterness. His confessions further destroy the picturesque family image Irene has constructed, and ruin the self-deluded perception she had of her lifestyle's stability. Jim's plea for her to think of the children further implies that Irene's delusions have made her dangerously self-centered and selfish. After being confronted with knowledge of her spouse's unhappiness, and the reality of her family's finances, Irene can no longer hold on to her feelings of superiority.

Irene warns Jim that the neighbors will hear their fight, causing Jim's anger to flare, as he does not care who overhears. He asks why Irene is acting "so Christly," and lists out cruel things she has done to her family; this includes stealing her mother's jewelry, and refusing to give her sister money when she was in need. He then asks why Irene's "piety" and "virtue" seemed to disappear when she visited an "abortionist."

Despite the lessons Irene has learned about the hazards of maintaining appearances, she insists on hiding the family's quarrels to preserve their respectability. Jim finally reveals that Irene's overinflated self-righteousness and naivety hide secrets that are darker and more numerous than what the radio has revealed: Irene is cruel and unfeeling towards her family, and she also terminated a pregnancy illegally. In this way, the radio teaches Irene lessons about herself, not merely about others: it prompts a confrontation that forces her into a state of self-awareness for the first time.

Irene feels "disgraced and sickened," but keeps the **radio** on, hoping that she will hear kind words, such as the soothing storytelling of the neighbors' nurse, Miss Armstrong. In the background, Jim continues to yell at her, and the radio delivers a news bulletins about a "railroad disaster in Tokyo," a Church fire, and the weather in a "noncommittal" voice.

Despite the destruction of Irene's carefully constructed, carefree persona, she clings to the radio, hoping it will play music and give her a chance to remain innocent. The radio, as a symbol of knowledge, offers no respite; instead, it informs her of additional morbid and bleak situations. In this way, the radio further reinforces Irene's lost sense of innocence: she is now inescapably aware of her neighbors'?and the world's?problems.

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