

## Original Paper

# The Realistic Dilemma of Suburban Life: Upon John Cheever's Work *Bullet Park* as an Example for American Middle-Class Families

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### Abstract

*Bullet Park* is a novel written by American novelist John Cheever in the mid-late 20th century that echoes the suburban life of American middle-class families after World War II. As a fictional suburban town, the distinctive existence of *Bullet Park* is like a utopia attempting to hinder the invasion of real society. The men and women in the town live a glamorous life whilst conceding numerous unknown secrets. Cheever constructs the story into three chapters through the strategy of fragmented writing: *Nails*, *Hammer*, and the intersection of *Nails* and *Hammer*. The novel fully embodies the hypocritical persona of American middle-class families in social communication, the long-standing disorder & dilemma within the families and the generalized spiritual crisis that exists among the stratum who are lingering in agony. The author combines the personal growth experience of Cheever amid some relevant stories occurs to the protagonists inside to analyze the perplexity and floundering of American middle-class society, families, and individuals during that sensitive period, i.e., the period of "Counter-culture Movement".

### Keywords

John Cheever, American Middle-class Families, Fragmented Writing, Spiritual Crisis, Counter-culture Movement

### 1. Introduction

John Cheever (1912-1982), known as the "chronicler of the customs and sentiments of the American middle class", has published over 100 short stories and 5 novels throughout his half-century writing career and won a variety of literary awards for his remarkable literary achievements. Unfortunately,

“John Cheever’s achievements in literature were severely underestimated.” According to Struthers Burt (1943), “whether it is a novel or a short story, Cheever is one of the most prominent writers” (p. 9).

Cheever’s career as a writer can be divided into four phases: the first phase began with his debut work “*Expelled* (1929)” published in the *New Republic*. The second phase was the heyday of Cheever’s creation and a turning point in his creative ideas, from the mid-late 1950s to the late 1960s. The third stage is the depressed period of Cheever’s creation from 1969 to 1977. Suffering from depression prompted him to contemplate that his career as a writer was coming to an end, and he had a stab at ruining himself through alcohol and drug abuse. The fourth phase of writing career proceeded from 1977 to 1982. With the aid of his family, Cheever ultimately regained the long-lost spiritual liberation and freedom via refraining from alcohol and drug addiction, as well as resolving his mid-life crisis.

The author chose *Bullet Park* as his research object for two reasons: firstly, “*Bullet Park*” stems from the darkest third phase of Cheever’s writing career, bewilderment and anguish in mind provoked the author into firing on all cylinders to present the writing style with decadence and absurdity through the work itself. In *The Vision of John Cheever*, Hartman Lorie S. (1992) reports the following:

Cheever’s works reveal the chaos and alienation of contemporary American suburban life, and his novels adopts a realistic narrative style to make grotesque and supernatural factors concrete and perceptible, thus integrating a humorous and terrifying atmosphere.

Cheever altered his writing style in the past in *Bullet Park*, and successfully swung the linear narrative of his previous novels to spatial narrative by virtue of the bold and innovative fragmented writing strategy, which gave impetus to the simultaneous development of multiple characters and story-lines in the novel, making the readers seem to be in one real scene after another for a long time. Likewise, the author has comprehensively reviewed the research directions of scholars at home and abroad on Cheever’s works, and these research reports mainly revolve around the theme interpretation, discourse, and exploration of his writing style in his short stories. Notwithstanding these theses can delve deeply into a certain aspect of a theme, they lack in-depth and systematic analysis & argumentation of Cheever’s works, notably the study of novels. Rather than being a transformation of the author’s writing style, *Bullet Park* is more like a “soundless outcry” made by Cheever, the life of whom was haggard and struggling in the context under the turbulent times. The author intentionally selects *Bullet Park*, the most sarcastic and gloomy work in Cheever’s writing career for research text, aiming to dissect on the three leading characters (Nailles, Hammer and Tony) in the novel so as to render researchers with a more tangible and profound reflecting in regard to what a real American middle-class society it was. In the fictional utopia of suburban areas, dwellers strains with all their might to whitewash the crisis in exchange for temporary and superficial peace, yet what kind of real American middle-class society is actually nurtured will surely activate the spontaneous contemplation through this article.

## 2. The False Persona under Excessive Whitewash of American Middle Class

American middle class belongs to a relatively contradictory and awkward colony in the development of the entire American community: firstly, their lives have no boundary with urban underclass, which is not difficult to perceive from the circumstance that when wife Nellie went to a slum for the sake of seeking a so-called master to help son Tony alleviate the suffering, along with a sense of physiological discomfort caused by the visual impact of the surrounding environment ; Secondly, despite dressing up in various social occasions, employing nannies & gardeners from house to house, having decent jobs for husbands, receiving high-quality education for children, vividly presenting a life scene that should be in the upper-class circle; Nonetheless, they are deeply conscious of a cruel reality: the middle class is no matter how they follow suit to restore the lifestyle of privileged class, they will never be subordinate to this “rarefied circle”. In the suburban utopia created by Cheever, religious teachings are originally a paramount criterion for residents to judge good, evil, and virtue. But along with the advancement of the times, faith begins to crumble away at the edges; worldly enjoyments become the main theme of suburban residents’ lives. The bunch who lose their spiritual guidance eventually fall into the void of life. Taking the Wickwires, for instance, their admirable work posture in social settings makes it far-fetched to associate spiritual emptiness and desperate cries they exhibit upon returning to the usual rhythm of life.

### 2.1 *Communication Disorders of American Middle Class under the Influence of Vanity and Smugness*

The middle-class male group in the United States seems that they always aspire to project a distinctive image in the eyes of the outside world, while dreading others presumably penetrate the flaws attached on their souls. The social behavior of Nailles in chapter 8 vividly illustrates the psychological disorders of this group: “If you met Nailles on a train or a plane or a bus or a boat and asked him what he did he would describe himself as a chemist. If you questioned him further he would say that he worked for the Saffron Chemical Corporation but that was all you would get out of him” (Cheever, 2020, p. 94).

Another case sources from Hammer, he detests the name his grandmother casually opts for him and attempts to change it to “Robert Levy” with the aim of washing away the stain of his entire life labeled as “illegitimate child”; new identity will help himself rid of the long-standing middle-class quagmire, as well as back him further advance towards high-society circle. Even with the inexplicable hostility towards Jews among the grass-root class and middle class in American society with their general consensus that it is Jewish exploitation and manipulation that fiercely divide the society into terrifying gap between rich and poor, some of the citizens from middle classes are still desperate to blend into Jewish communities and integrate with their lives.

The affectation of the middle class is ubiquitous in their lives, male inhabitants in Bullet Park commute to and from the station in suits everyday. Their suits, just like armors, lulling them into a sense of security, proving their decency in life whilst restraining their impending madness as sedatives. In chapter 17 of the novel, the writer graphically portrays the oppressive and creepy mental activities in Nailles’s mind when he looks at the suits that have been paved on the bed through third person

perspective. It reads:

He did not cherish his nakedness but he detested his suit. Spread out on the bed it seemed to claim a rectitude and a uniformity that was repulsively unlike his nature. Did he want to go to the party in a fig leaf, a tiger skin, nothing at all? Something like that (Cheever, 2020, p. 218).

### *2.2 Image of Middle-Class Elders under Constraints of Rigid and Conservative Ideologies*

Multitudinous middle-class families in the United States are merely enamored by floating on the surface, they consciously construct a belief system that is applicable to door-to-door situations. Residents restrain themselves and their families as if they are being held against the backs by a mysterious organization with sharp knives. In chapter 2, the scene in which father Nailles searched for a dictionary on Tony's bookcase utterly demonstrates a image of regimented middle class with stereotyped and pathological dogma rooted in mind as follow:

① Sometime earlier, looking for a dictionary, he had taken one from his son's bookcase and as he opened the dictionary fifty or more printed photographs of naked women slipped and cataracted to the floor. He had been provoked, it had been his principal reaction (Cheever, 2020, p. 34).

② He was not least dismayed that his beloved son had chosen to collect these pictures instead of stamps, Indian arrowheads, geological specimens or numismatic rarities (Cheever, 2020, p. 34).

Likewise, Charlie Stringer, a person who makes a living by mailing pornography through the mails. He also has family full of happiness and harmony with a beautiful wife, three children, and two poodles. Although he sells obscenity for a living and is indeed a jerk, as Nailles assumes the following:

Why should a man who deals in filth have to live in cesspool? He's a bastard for sure but why shouldn't a bastard want to water his grass and play softball with the kids? (Cheever, 2020, p. 60).

If no one pierces through that window, none will that know the murkiness of every household under the illumination.

### **3. Distortion and Chaos in Middle-Class Families**

From the characters depicted in the novel, it is easy to find that middle-class group in the United States remain almost pathologically obsessed with the superficial happiness of family. The notion of happiness, in author's angle, just like a person's life dancing on the thin ice; if you are lucky enough, the thin ice may not break for a lifetime, but what a great contingency this kind of luck prolongs. Nailles' family, with happiness and virtuousness, just likes an impeccable scene of family life on the paper; Hammer, with great wealth and higher education, has revitalized his bewilderment in life with married life. If readers were to experience the middle-class family life of these two enviable characters from an outsider's perspective, it would be like the scene presented under the green cover of the novel: Two men baths in the lazy summer days, one leisurely strolls his beloved dog, the other habitually repairs the lawn for his backyard. What an enchanting life it is!

Obviously, the middle-class family crisis that Cheever intends to interpret in the writing is a happy illusion shrouded in mist; this extreme misfortune hidden in privacy may derive from personal growth,

marital life or work situation of this stratum.

### *3.1 Precarious Relationship between Men and Women*

Nailles and Nelly are distinctly the most typical model couple representatives of middle-class families in the United States. Their stable relationship, mutual respect, and love for families genuinely envy everyone. As a spouse, Nailles upholds the martial belief of monogamy, loves his wife Nelly and firmly maintains the sanctity of marriage. Many other women tries every means to teasing him, but “his male member would take a painful attitude of disinterest. It would seem to summon him home” (Cheever, 2020, p. 22). Obviously, wife Nelly is seemingly not strongly bounded by the religious etiquette in the heart; she has several opportunities to cheat, but it was the immaturity of the timing that prevents her from betraying her husband. In chapter 8, the scene of wife Nelly and the “libertine” Jack meeting at a party cannot refrain from making people lament the real image behind this flawless wife. It reads:

At parties he often took Nellie aside and spoke about what he would do if they were ever left alone. She was not offended and was sometimes provoked (Cheever, 2020, p. 102).

The description of setting here truly reflects that wife Nelly is tired of following the routine life, albeit an innocent woman with no room for any filth in her eyes. She is hunger for changing life, banking on someone to activate her dead heart and save her lost soul.

The marital life of the Hammer can even be described as magical. After dating his wife Marietta for 6 weeks, he stepped into the marriage hall in a flash. Imprudent marriage often accompanies a little bit of hidden misfortunes, lonely Hammer also perceive it. He discovers that Marietta has a capricious personality as weather. If clear weather, her deepest dissatisfaction will be utterly riled up ; But if thunder rolls, she will rest upon her husband as a clinging bird. It is such a spouse who seems to suffer from “bipolar disorder” that accompanies the pathological Hammer, thereupon, he can’t help but imagine some dreamy girls to address his physiological needs. Despite his deep love for wife Marietta, Hammer’s feelings still contain the yearning for radical licentiousness and staggering freedom: he likes women, men, children or even dogs. These incredible scenes draws out the character of Hammer to a climax in Chapter 15 as follow:

- ① On Friday I went out to Connecticut and she met me at the station. There was a lot of kissing in the car. I said that I loved her. She said she loved me (Cheever, 2020, p. 190).
- ② I kept my distance in the shower and when we went to the bar I definitely got the feeling that something was going on. He kept bumping into me and touching me (Cheever, 2020, p. 191).
- ③ I drove back on Sunday afternoon and I’ve never seen or heard of him but I definitely felt something like love for him during the few hours we spent together (Cheever, 2020, p. 192).
- ④I was flattered, of course, but flattery is some part of susceptibility and all the way home I thought tenderly of the old dog as if I had left a love (Cheever, 2020, P.193).

The male-female relationships of the two characters in Cheever’s work explicitly shows cracks, which cannot be easily detected by bystanders. Ultimately, Cheever still wants to convey some of his personal disdain for middle-class genders in the United States through his work: corruption of public decency,

mentality of pretentiousness, and commonly chaotic relationships. Their lives are not as worthwhile and meaningful as they perform, and the well-dressed men and women under the bright lights are nothing more than “walking dead” wandering around corners of society.

### 3.2 *Warped Ideology under the Traditional Views of Family Affection*

The depiction of the two characters Nailles and Hammer in *Bullet Park* involves a large amount of family elements, which almost projects the tone and theme of the entire work. This work was completed in the late 1960s, during which ideological trends were surging and crises were rampant; throughout the 1960s, the rapidly developing post-war economy in the United States was encountering a spiritual revolution ignited by young generation who no longer cared about realizing the “American Dream” by virtue of earning money to change their destinies. Substantial numbers of young people hailed from middle-class families lived a life of resistance to mainstream ideology, firmly believing that only by constantly fighting against existing systems and voicing their own perspectives can drive the society towards a more democratic path.

The character Tony, son of Nailles, manifestly portrays the character of the young people in counter-culture times who attempts to break through the social cage by resisting the shackles of conservative values from middle-class family. Tony is out of spirits because he is expelled from the baseball team due to school-weariness but seeks to scatter his grief by reading poetry; It is the opportunity to go to the bookstore that leads Tony to get acquainted with the character Mrs. Hubbard, the one who completely breaks the backward traditional system of Nailles’s family for many years. In Chapter 7, there is a paragraph describing Nailles’ psychological activity towards the incident regarding Tony and Mrs. Hubbard. It reads:

After breakfast Nailles asked Tony if he wanted to cut wood but the boy said he thought he’d do his homework. The word “homework” touched Nailles- it seemed to mean innocence, youth, purity, simple things-all lost in the bed of a sluttish war widow. He felt sad. (Cheever, p. 85)

The description of this segment is truly marvelous and profound to readers as it deeply reflects the inner thoughts that Cheever wanted to convey: within the middle-class families of that era, the old-fashioned and conservative ideology are always deeply rooted in every household, and inhabitants defined a person’s dignity based on rigid dimensions such as work, education, marriage, and family. The deficiency of any elements will be regarded as a manifestation of “rebellion”. Just like Nailles believed that as a post-war widow, Mrs. Hubbard should remarry as soon as possible; and son Tony has an affair with a woman who has a history of marriage is synonymous with a soul stained, which is overwhelmingly revolting.

Turning to the circumstance that happens to Hammer, it is commonplace to view a scene that a person sits on the beach amid reading a book individually on the beach from both reader’s and view’s perspectives. Who needs to relax alone in this noisy society? But for conservatives who have long been influenced by feudal distorted family views, this behavior is undoubtedly abrupt and bizarre. But compared to conservatives who have long been influenced by feudal distorted family values, this kind

of behavior is indisputably abrupt and bizarre. The scene in chapter 11 graphically reflects the stereotyped and distorted ideology which is penetrated into middle-class family as follows:

I was alone and it was at a time when the regard for domesticity had gotten so intense that the natural condition or the singleness had become a sore point of suspicion. One appeared on the beach perforce with one's wife, one's children, sometimes one's parents or a brace of house guest. One seldom saw a lonely man. (Cheever, 2020, p. 133)

Regardless of what kind of scale, formal or casual external activities they participate in, old-fashioned middle-class families are anxious to appear in the public eye on a family basis; for them, the lack of family members is equivalent to expose their long-hidden inherent contradictions to the public, whereupon they have always been active in assorted social occasions with family as unit so as to guard against this terrifying consequence. Hammer's upbringing experience is assuredly unfortunate. His parents, who are secret lovers without emotional accumulation, irresponsibly brought him into the world. His grandma, who is rooted from a prosperous family, raises the poor juvenile. Despite the fact that grandmother provides little Hammer with tangible needs doesn't fill the emotional gap of the young man. Middle-class families of that era, a better background means more rigorous family rules and regulations. Before the age of eleven or twelve, Hammer has every meals in the tea room; although he is later allowed to sit at the table, he is still overwhelmed by the phenomenon that every member of the family is disciplined and consistently to report the worthy things that happens around them during the day, which just like a routine general meeting secretly is held every night in the form of a family gathering. Hammer's inconceivable childhood experiences have been quite astonishing for overseas readers. In the eyes of the world, America is ultimately the most open, democratic, and child-oriented country in the world, so why does this feudal and conservative parenting model breed in families in middle stratum in this nation? It is certain that some of the understandable reasons merely like he is indeed too young to capture the interesting anecdotes that happen during the day as keenly as adults; or it is that he really resists such formalism in his heart, which finally impels him to seal his mouth at the dinner table.

#### **4. The Spiritual Crisis of Middle-Class Families Is Rampant**

Chekhov (1904) once proposed a theory: "if in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise don't put it there" (p. 521). Cheever clearly follows this writing strategy in naming the two main characters; he uses homophonic naming to evoke infinite imagination and anticipation in readers about the stories of the two characters, Nailles (i.e., Nails) and Hammer. What kind of passionate collision will happen between them? *Bullet Park* is divided into three storylines: the first part narrates the family story between father Nailles and son Tony; the second part portrays Hammer's personal growth experience; the third part is about the story of the final encounter between "Nailles" and "Hammer". Such kind of layouts proves that Cheever finally points to the common mental disease of the suburban residents through the connection of the three story lines,

namely, Nailles, Tony and Hammer; while the layout of fragmented writing is merely a writing strategy to demonstrate the generalization of this phenomenon.

The fragmentation of Cheever's suburban writing actually reflects his pursuit of "spatial narrative". He successfully breaks the limit of linear narrative and attempts to "deal with the problem of 'simultaneous' events in life and 'successive events' in narrative". His fragmented writing strategy presents the family life of assorted characters in the work toward readers in an orderly manner. Meanwhile, the juxtaposition of each segment is no matter of disarray. All of the fragments focus on the life crisis of suburban residents and exhibit the generalized crisis of suburban life.

#### *4.1 The Contradiction between Ideal and Reality Is Growing with the Passage of Time*

"What's wrong with Tony"? This is a question worth of reflection by readers in this work. Tony's school-weariness unquestionably reflects Cheever's own educational experience. The former is expelled from the baseball team for resisting French lesson, while the latter is directly expelled from the school for his deep hatred of Greek literature. The similar educational experiences of the two people here directly cast the plight of American youth from middle-class family are subjected to highly restrictive professional courses under that complicated era. The teaching model which stifles nature definitely pushes their budding outlook on life and values towards distortion and reality, which is precisely reflected in Tony's father Nailles. Tony, who has lost all his faith, initiates a month-long bedridden illness. His parents hires three different doctors, but no one, whether it's a general practitioner, psychiatrist, or specialist for treating sleepwalking, is able to save Tony except for a \$500 per visit fee and a diagnosis of the disease named "mononucleosis". Finally, mother Nelly finds a folk master "Rutaholah" who lives on the upper floor of the funeral home in the slum to treat him. The so-called witchcraft therapy of the master is nothing more than a psychological hint. He guides Tony to repeat his prayers, creating the illusion of happy life for him. Tony receives the spiritual comfort brought by this psychological suggestion, and eventually gets out of bed and returns to a normal life.

Tony's strange malady may seem puzzling at first glance, but given the suburbs in Cheever's work undergoes a transformation from romantic countryside to mechanized reality, while the middle class in his work cannot match the beautiful countryside in memory with the real suburban world, resulting in a spiritual crisis (Rachel, 2001). Tony's symptom mirrors the American middle class desperately to break through the cage and return to freedom during those times. However, the advancement of society and cruelty of reality cannot tolerate anyone to stay out of it, and it is inevitable that some people may feel overwhelmed and trigger deep panic and uneasiness in their hearts. Cheever here conveys his life creed through the words of the alleged master here: In the middle- class society we reside in, the majority of cohorts are propensity to replace moral and spiritual discipline with material things; but human should have a clear view of good and evil, albeit inappropriate, it is better than nothing. Cheever's faith is apparently unfortunate, and yet it is also indispensable. Because he is keenly aware that the advancement of society will inevitably shift towards the mechanization of reality; so since the momentum poses everyone impossibly to stay aloof, it is vital to create some personal beliefs: even if it



is religion, ideal, or witchcraft, which can at least convert the soul once plunging into chaos.

#### 4.2 *The Rootless Generalization of Middle-Class Cohort*

Cheever always believes that “modern life is fragmented and nomadic”. It is precisely under the influence of this concept that a consistent theme in Cheever’s suburban writing is concern, i.e., floating and rootless state of the American suburban people after the war. In his work, Cheever projects a scene of suburbanites losing their roots from microcosmic to macroscopic angles, creating a sentimental atmosphere in the work. As mentioned in Hammer’s main storyline in the work, the gap in family ties caused the illegitimate son to have an insatiable desire for his parents after grandmother passes away. Regardless of remarriage with new family from his father and migration in Austria from his mother, the deep-rooted traditional family values with the contempt and indifference incurred by his identity of illegitimate child make him recklessly seek his parents. But reality always backfires. What catches the eye in the door of Ritz is not the kind and warm image of a father, but a drunken old man naked with a shapeless figure whilst a string of champagne stoppers hanging around his neck; as he heads off to Austria to visit his mother, he finds that what catches the eye is not an elegant and dignified image of a mother, but a insane old woman who has salted her hair through miserable life. With the last glimmer of hope for his family shattered, he starts to wander around the corners of the city like a dead-alive person. While drifting off on the street, a room with yellow walls utterly strikes Hammer’s heart. He is firmly convinced that “whoever lived there lived a useful and illustrious life” (Cheever, 2020, P. 164). Since then, Hammer has been of no fixed abode and roving from one hotels to another in search of the room lined with yellow walls. In this section, Cheever spends a lot of time picturing the process of Hammer’s search; and the room lined with yellow walls is precisely the sense of belonging and security embedded in the depth of his heart.

The process of seeking is always accompanied by void and helplessness, and losing-the-roots even renders the character despair in the abyss with silent wailing at that time. The death of grandmother, the disdain of bystanders, the inadequacy of parents, and the failure of investment ultimately causes depression in this poor man. He indulges in alcoholism and fantasies regardless of time and place, reflecting the fact that dwellers on the outskirts of the city scramble to maintain the normal order of surface life in spite of the deep-seated rootlessness that has torn to shreds. The storyline of Hammer in the work is full of intrigue and satire, but it is not incomprehensible from the reader’s angle of view to view his absurd act. Because Hammer’s conduct acutely allude to the author Cheever, who is incompetent to extricate himself from the swamp of alcoholism and depression at the age of 56, but sending a distress signal to the external world by outlining the character of Hammer as his own projection.

## 5. Conclusion

After World War II, the United States underwent a golden period of economic prosperity. The strong momentum of economic growth in the 1950s continued until the 1960s, and over 50% of Americans successfully squeezed into the middle class during this wave. The improvement of living conditions has led increasingly number urban dwellers to relocate to the suburbs with the aim of enjoying the advantages of both urban and rural life. During that time, the process of suburbanization has officially become the mainstream trend of urban development in the United States in the 20th century. Nonetheless, the advancement and transformation of society inescapably tug at Cheever's heart to grope for new creative inspiration, as praised by Scott Donald (1988) that "Having keen insight to observe the world, and analyzing social reality like a born anatomist" (p. 156). Cheever ponders over the social reality in the United States through spatial changes driven by the pace of suburbanization after World War II, and ultimately created *Bullet Park*, a novel with a strong sense of absurdity and satire. The work breaks the traditional idyllic image of the suburb and adopts literary device to strongly respond to the real-life problems exposed by the rapid development of American suburbs: frequent relocation, alienated family relationships, and technological development of the times. The sense of insecurity and deprivation emanated from the surging undercurrents entangle the suburban middle class, who are trapped in the storm of social development and reform with a state of communal rootlessness, demonstrating a disconnect between traditional ideas and modern society.

And of course, Cheever's suburban writing is not completely dark. His exploration regarding the path of redemption infuses a touch of warmth to the work, as well as insinuate his fervent yearning for a better life. Some critics view Cheever as a comedian, an optimistic and nostalgic person who meticulously observes this devastated world and firmly believes its beauty inside. Frederick (1982) narrates it that "Cheever's novel is a rural scenery full of comedy: although the world is chaotic, life is still beautiful" (p. 218). Just as Naille's pill, Hammer's room lined with yellow wall, and master Rutaholah's prayer for therapy, either of which is the haven for the exhausted and bleak American middle class during that period. Cheever warns every reader through the deep suffering of the inhabitants in *Bullet Park* that facing the vortex of reality, we must bravely cross it. Only by enduring the provocation of fate and the hardship of life can we forge a mighty and steadfast life.

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