Recipe for Scene Structure
Margin Notes ~ Jen Manuel

Ingredients:

A location for the scene

An initial emotion or psychological outlook

Dialogue

A dramatic pause

A discovery or a decision (optional: both)

A deep reflection on the situation

A section break

A passage of background context (a panorama view of situation)

Directions:

Pick a scene from your story that you want to reshape. Set the scene with a short passage of concrete details and an initial emotion or psychological outlook. You might also position the characters in physical relation to one another to demonstrate the nature of their relationship and who holds the power in this situation.

Write the scene's dialogue by using one of these modes: negotiation, seduction, conflict. If you want to try negotiation in order to model your revision more closely to Cheever's work, you can transform almost any subject into a mode of negotiation.

Add a dramatic pause at a moment in the dialogue when you want to leave the reader in suspense for a moment. Use the pause to zoom into the character's mind for a brief moment. Reveal how they are perceiving the situation at this point.

Finish the dialogue, ending with either a discovery or a decision (or both).

Zoom once again into your character's interiority. Have your character assess the situation and take inventory of their feelings. What does the scene mean to the character? How does it change things? They might also anticipate the future as part of this reflection. Make sure you spend sufficient narrative space in this section.

If the character makes a decision as a result of their reflection, write a short depiction of this decision, preferrably by having the character enact the decision. If your scene does not call for a decision here, you might consider having the character do some sort of purposeful action (e.g., She brushed past him and marched through the crowd toward the ...)

Use a section break and then write a passage of background. Details that give us the wider context of this scene.