The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit: An Examination of Suburbia, Organization Men, and Conformity in 1950s America

BY CHRISTINE KELLEY

Sloan Wilson reached his greatest renown as a writer with the publication of The *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* in 1956, a novel loosely based on his life. Yet the novel's importance came from its connection to the broader culture. Set in the 1950's, the story follows war veteran Tom Rath and his wife Betsy as they maneuver through transitory American suburbia, aspire to find Tom a higher paying job, and try to raise children with contemporary cultural values. Meanwhile, both struggle with inexplicable dissatisfaction in their lives, their roles, and their marriage. Wilson offered topics to consider about everyday life in the 1950's, such as the rapid spread of suburban development following WWII, the expansion of the middle class through upward mobility, and the conformity of male white collar workers among whom Tom numbers. The Raths could have been any family living in the ever-expanding suburban satellites of major cities. For organization purposes, Wilson chose one of the greatest American cities, New York City. He painted an uneasy portrait of American life, placing Tom the head of the nuclear family—as the main character.

The Raths are a normal couple, with mid-century, middle class ambitions. They raise their children to the best of their abilities while sticking to rigid gender roles. They want a bigger house, a more comfortable income, and worry about whether they will be

able to afford to send their kids to college, anxieties familiar to middle class families today. Although they are disdainful of their neighbors' conformity, the Raths realize they are bound by the same desires for social mobility and are self-conscious about it. Tom has passed his self-consciousness into a frustration, an inner rage. He is wrath. There appears to be no escape from the conformity; with three young children to care for, the Raths could only dream of breaking free from their constrictive lifestyles, and must attempt to make the best of the situation.

Tom Rath and his post-war corporate peers are more than just "suits;" they are the types described in William Whyte's *Organization Men*. Organization Men, by definition,

are not the workers, nor are they the white-collar people in the usual, clerk sense of the word. These people work only for The Organization. The ones I am talking about *belong* to it as well. They are the ones of our middle class who have left home, spiritually as well as physically, to take the vows of organization life, and it is they who are the mind and soul of our great self-perpetuating institutions.¹

They are in effect the mechanism of the corporation, and spend their careers trying to move up the elevator into a corner office with a nice view of the city. Although Tom chafes against the organizations that he works for, finding himself dissatisfied as a cog within the clockwork of the corporation, he struggles to break free. His career may not be ideal, but since he was a young man, he had not been given the choice to seek another profession. Immediately after the war, his grandmother pushed him into working for a

¹ William H. Whyte, The Organization Man, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 3.

charity organization. It follows that—after years as a successful PR man—upward mobility would bring him to the United Broadcasting Corporation.

When interviewed for his job at the United Broadcasting, Tom cynically ruminates about applying for another position as an Organization Man:

The most significant fact about me is that I detest the United Broadcasting Corporation, with all its soap operas, commercials, and yammering studio audiences, and the only reason I'm willing to spend my life in such a ridiculous enterprise is that I want to buy a more expensive house with a better brand of gin.²

Tom goes right for the throat on his true feelings for his future employer. He does not care for the corporation; in fact he detests it, but is willing to resign himself to working in the television industry if it means economic stability. In fact—having no practical medical experience—Tom is barely qualified for the job he is initially hired for: creating a board focused on promoting mental health. He knows next to nothing about psychology. His boss, Mr. Hopkin, quickly recognizes Tom's ability and promotes him.

Once he is invited to enter the upper echelons of the organization, though, he resists by refusing to remain Mr. Hopkin's personal assistant. Instead, Tom chooses to return to his original job at United Broadcasting, working behind the scenes for Hopkin's board of mental health. The upshot is he no longer has to commute: the headquarters are moved to his home in South Bay. Also, by refusing the job as Hopkin's assistant, he no longer has to work nights and weekends and may spend more time with his children.

² Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1955), Kindle edition.

Rath is living the American Dream at the beginning of the novel, yet he and Betsy agree why they are miserable: it is the house. "The Raths had bought the house in 1946 shortly after Tom got out of the army[...]without talking about it much, they both began to think of the house as a trap, and they no more enjoyed refurbishing it than a prisoner would delight in shining up the bars of his cell."³ According to a review of the book by Catherine Jurca, "the development suburb is represented as a breeding ground of alienated homeowners who need only to capitalize upon their dissatisfaction to move up and out...Tom and Betsy's dissatisfaction is normal and connected with the ability to get out."⁴ The couple had planned to stay there only a few years, but as they continued to have children the two years turned into ten. Development of suburbs anticipates the dissatisfaction homeowners would feel, being tantalized by new developments and the success of their neighbors.

After the war, however, there were simply not enough single-family homes to meet the demands of these veterans. According to historian Kenneth Jackson, in 1947 six million families were doubling up with relatives, while another 500,000 occupied "temporary quarters." In response, the federal government had already begun a vast new construction program to build five million new homes. In 1934, the National Housing Act created the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). The GI Bill supplemented this in 1944. Working together with the newly created Veteran's Administration (VA), the FHA established a program to help the sixteen million soldiers

³ Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, Kindle Edition.

⁴ Catherine Jurca, "The Sanctimonious Suburbanite: Sloan Wilson's The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit," *American Literary History* 11, no. 1 (1999): 92.

and sailors of World War II purchase housing. Congress approved billions of dollars' worth of mortgage insurance. The VA provided federal insurance for loans and encouraged private investors to enter the housing mortgage market. Also, compared to the average monthly payment of \$93 to rent a city apartment, the \$53 a month for a suburban home's mortgage payment was an excellent incentive to live in the suburbs.⁵

Levitt and Sons, one of the nation's largest homebuilders, rose to the occasion and built the most famous housing development in mid-twentieth century America. With 17,400 houses planned for 82,000 people, Levittown became the largest development to be erected by a single building company. Employing an assembly-line method to mass-produce houses, more than thirty houses went up per day at the peak of construction. Located twenty-five miles from Manhattan, Levittown boasted a short commute time and low costs for its homes, between \$7900 for a Cape Cod and \$9500 for a ranch. The development was initially limited to veterans and excluded minorities (this seems ridiculous to consider in retrospect, since WWII veterans were of all races).⁶ At the end of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, the Raths plan to capitalize on this trend. By parceling his grandmother's estate into subdivisions, Tom is finally able to reach the economic stability that he searches for throughout the novel.⁷

In Robert C. Wood's study of suburban life, also written during the 1950s, Wood references *The Organization Man* to exhibit the theory of suburbia as a "renaissance." The most fashionable definition at the time, he claimed, is the theory of suburbia as a

⁵ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, (New York: The Oxford University Press, 1985), 232-33.
⁶ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 235-36.
⁷ Ibid., 234.

"looking glass" into the character, behavior, and culture of middle class America. The suburbanite, to Wood, was the average American. This looking glass did not reflect the old images of American life, where a man had a set purpose and settled into a home for life; instead, "in their place is a prototype whom it is difficult to idealize: a man without direction or ambition except for his desire for a certain portion of material society, a man so conscious of his fellows that he has no convictions of his own." These mid-century suburban developments thus encouraged conformity by arranging the use of home space and time, inside and outside the house—especially relations within the family—in favor of acceptance from peers in their community over more private, close family ties.⁸

At the beginning of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, it appears that the looking glass theory is correct. Tom wants a better job simply for the money; it is not a job that he thinks he will enjoy. He and Betsy are so motivated to move out of the house they hate, that they emulate to their neighbors' desires to leave the neighborhood. The house is not only a marker of their flaws, but a constant reminder that they have descended from their upper-class upbringings. Tom has no apparent desire to amass egregious wealth, but instead, to reach stability. He does not worry about "keeping up with the Joneses" but does fret over whether he can save enough to send his kids to college. In reality, Betsy and Tom are looking to put down roots, and to provide a future for their children.

⁸ Robert C. Wood, *Suburbia: Its People and Their Politics*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958), 4.

Unlike the transients described in *The Organization Man*, Tom returns to his hometown of South Bay. Whyte says of mobile suburbanites, "one of the great tacit bonds the transients share is a feeling, justifiable or not, that by moving they acquire an intellectual breadth that will forever widen the gap between them and their home towns."⁹ Perhaps Tom never feels this gap, because South Bay is a largely upper class community, whose residents would be on the same intellectual level as the Raths. The influx of other suburbanites as new developments spring up in South Bay could be another factor in Tom and Betsy's easy outward assimilation. Yet, South Bay is Tom's home throughout the novel even when he does not live there. He may be an Organization Man, but he does not share the transient nature, which Whyte argues such men possess.

Meanwhile, the 1950's saw a different type of growth: the "baby boom." Rather than the prewar average of two children, parents were opting instead to have three or four; more women were also choosing to have children. Twenty-nine million births were recorded between 1949 and 1960. Becoming a mother was again portrayed by popular culture as the highest form of happiness and fulfillment for a woman. This view was made apparent in both televisions shows such as *I Love Lucy* and *Leave it to Beaver*, and advertising from this era. After the tumultuous years of the Depression and war, many women sought comfort in creating a modern version of the Victorian "cult of domesticity." They wanted to produce a home full of children to alleviate the "cold forces of disruption and alienation" that the nuclear buildup of the cold war caused. In

⁹ Whyte, Organization Man, 3.

fact, childlessness was considered almost a deviant behavior.¹⁰ "Nearly everyone believed that family togetherness, focused on children was the mark of a successful and wholesome personal life."¹¹ Actresses who were famous sex symbols before the war, such as Lana Turner and Joan Crawford, began to appear on magazine covers with their young children.¹² In this wholesome world of family life, women were no longer portrayed as sexy, but as wives and mothers.¹³

Betsy Rath may be presented as the perfectly supportive wife that Tom needs, but she is far from the domestic goddess depicted by the mid-century media. Indeed, she is very human in her imperfections. First, she commits a faux pas by buying an expensive vase—a conspicuous symbol of wealth that neither of the Raths can afford. This is one vestige of her wealthy Bostonian upbringing, which she has struggled to part with. The couple quarrel over her purchase and end up breaking it, leaving a question mark-shaped crack in their wall. This scene in the novel is the most apparent voicing of Tom's wrath and Betsy's frustration:

The crack remained as a perpetual reminder of Betsy's moment of extravagance, Tom's moment of violence, and their inability either to fix walls properly or to pay to have them fixed. It seemed ironic to Tom that the house should preserve a souvenir of such things, while allowing evenings of pleasure and kindness to slip by without a trace.¹⁴

¹⁰ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bond: American Families in the Cold War Era*, (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 124.

¹¹ Elaine Tyler May, Homeward Bond, 124.

¹² One such magazine mentioned by May is *Photoplay*.

¹³ Ibid., 124.

¹⁴ Sloan Wilson, The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit, Kindle Edition, Location 89-91.

Its symbolic importance demonstrates the subtle cracks beneath the surface in Tom and Betsy's relationship. Needing to spend beyond her means may also be interpreted as a desire for her own, independent income.

Really, Betsy seems rather trapped and dissatisfied by the role society has designated for her. At one point, she disciplines her daughter, Janie for coloring on the wall, only to burst into tears alongside her. Her children are generally well behaved, though, and (other than a usual case of chicken pox) entirely healthy and normal. Although she chides herself for neglecting to raise the children within a religion and for providing only cereal for breakfast, Betsy is as successful at her job at home as Tom is at his outside the home. Her homemaking skills are effective, but not neurotically spectacular. In spite of her supposed shortcomings, she is a fine and diligent mother. She is a realistic woman, not a stereotype.

As for men, fatherhood was believed to give meaning to their own monotonous existence. Their main job was to support their family, even if it meant spending years in an unfulfilling career; it gave them a reason to get up in the morning, put on their drab gray suits, hop on the train, and struggle through a nine to five. Television portrayed this quest for upward mobility—providing for his children—as the ultimate demonstration of manliness and authority. Tom, likewise, tried fulfilling this role for his family: "When you come right down to it, a man with three children has no damn right to say that money doesn't matter." ¹⁵ However, only Betsy's constant cheerleading has kept him from losing momentum. His relations with his children remain sweet, but

¹⁵ Ibid., Kindle Location 155.

shallow. There are few descriptions of his interactions with them other than an impulse to buy presents when they are ill. Otherwise father acted mostly as a threatening force of punishment as mother calls, "Just wait till your father gets home!" Tom's role as the sole breadwinner, and the long hours at the office this entails, has alienated him from his children, which created tension between society's view of the "good father," and the realistic imbalance between parental interactions in a household with a sole breadwinner.

Betsy could have gotten a job; the post-war years brought more wives into the paid labor force than ever before. "This was one legacy that Depression-bred daughters inherited: women sought employment to bolster the family budget but not to disrupt domestic power relationships." ¹⁶ When a family struggled with finances, it was considered better for a wife to work than for the household to do without necessities.

Although the Raths are struggling, they are too stubborn to become a dualincome family. Not once is it suggested that Betsy find a job outside of the home. Instead, she devises the entire development scheme for the Rath estate. Once again, without breaking the image of a housewife, she finds a fulfilling way to supplement her family income. Betsy, while balancing her jobs as wife and mother, is in charge of developing their new business. While perpetuating the growth of suburbia on Tom's family estate, they are looking into the future of American housing, and are evolving from a couple into a partnership.

¹⁶ Elaine Tyler May, Homeward Bond, 149.

The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit ends on a rather empty note. The Raths' first house may have been sold, but the question mark remains. Tom and Betsy have managed to change their situation, but not really found resolution. We are not offered a full glimpse into their new world—starting fresh—in South Bay to know if the family is satisfied with the change. Since we know the novel is autobiographical, it is interesting to note that Sloan Wilson and his first wife (on whom Betsy is based) eventually divorced. Like The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit, 1950's America leaves us with conflicting emotions: one may find nostalgia for this decade, or will condemn it for its conformity. Really, there is a complex marriage between the two reactions. It was a time of prosperity after two World Wars and a terrible Depression when for the first time in decades, the average woman or man's future looked a tiny bit brighter. The population was young and optimistic, and believed that they could really live out all their dreams. Yet, this was not the case for everyone. As Tom and Betsy sum up after realizing that peace and stability does not necessarily guarantee happiness: "What's been the matter with us?' 'I don't know,' he said. 'I guess I expected peace to be nothing but a time for sitting in the moonlight with you like this, and I was surprised to find that this isn't quite all."¹⁷

¹⁷ Wilson, The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit, Kindle Edition.