Sanctimonious Suburbanites and the Postwar Novel

"THE MIDDLE CLASS, ALAS!"

Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* begins by asserting the protagonists' absolute hostility to the place they live, a more salient fact about them than even their identity: "By the time they had lived seven years in the little house on Greentree Avenue in Westport, Connecticut, they both detested it."[1] "They" have their reasons. The house is "too small [and] ugly" (5), and although they bought it new, linoleum, plaster, and plumbing need to be repaired or replaced. It seems as well that "they" can blame their anonymity on the house, which is "almost precisely like the houses on all sides" (5). But the problem is not that it obliterates who they are; rather, the shabby house reveals it too readily in ways that discredit and distort them:

> [T]he house had a kind of evil genius for displaying proof of their weaknesses and wiping out all traces of their strengths. The ragged lawn and weed-filled garden proclaimed to passers-by and the neighbors that Thomas R. Rath and his family disliked "working around the place" and couldn't afford to pay someone else to do it. The interior of the house was even more vengeful. In the living room there was a big dent in the plaster near the floor, with a huge crack curving up from it in the shape of a question mark. (3)

The crack followed an argument about money that ended when Tom threw an expensive vase against the wall. An attempt to repair it failed, and instead they are left with "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" (4). The house reveals Betsy as an imperfect domestic manager and exposes them both as aspiring but failed "Do-It-Your selfers" who lack financial as well as creative resources.[2] The crack and a child's inky handprints, the individual traces that the Babbitt house lacked, personalize but also devalue the Raths' house. Far from nurturing the inhabitants, it is "a trap" (5) from which they may never escape.

As we have seen, there is nothing unusual about a twentieth-century American novel that begins by repudiating the home of its protagonists, whether "the trap" is an overcrowded and overpriced kitchenette like the Thomases' or, less convincingly, a two-story Dutch Colonial. What differentiates *Man in Gray Flannel* from the suburban novels we have encountered so far is the Raths' own immediate, unmistakable, and almost hopeless opposition to it as well. Ownership of a suburban house is treated here as a sign of economic weakness, suspended ambition, the *failure* of the American dream instead of its fruition. The Raths' failure is palpable. Although their families no longer have much money, Betsy had a modest coming-out party in Boston, and Tom's grandmother continues to live on the huge family estate in South Bay, Connecticut, where he was raised. The stereotypical development house poses a challenge to their otherwise legitimate claim to the title "Thomas R. Rath and family," which parodically evokes the kind of status that a house in the suburbs once communicated and conferred, but in the opening of *Man in Gray Flannel* only publicly disclaims.

Until the 1940s the suburbs continued to be identified primarily with affluent middle- and upper-middle-class families, where house ownership was the special, if not unique, province of the Thomas R. Raths of this country.[3] The career of Levitt and Sons is a case in point. From the prewar construction of small subdivisions on Long Island for the upper-middle-class market, the firm turned in the late forties to building inexpensive single-family houses and communities on an unprecedented scale for returning veterans and their families. The mass production of houses did not occur in the factory, as some Depression-era commentators had anticipated, but at the subdivision, where the Levitts relied on traditional materials and designs such as the Colonial and the Cape Cod, as well as a western import, the "Rancher," to attract prospective purchasers.[4] In the postwar period, mass production, along with cheap and accessible land, financial incentives for veterans and builders, and high wages meant that suburban house ownership became available to most white middle-class and many working-class families for the first time in American history.[5]

By the fifties *the suburb* popularly signified *the development*, a place of "uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste," "conforming," like the people who lived there, "to a common mold": the new residence of "the mass middle class."[6] Thus even the affluent town of Westport, which dates to the Colonial period and was within the suburban reaches of New York before the postwar housing boom, appears in *Man in Gray Flannel* as though it were simply a prison house of new developments and indistinguishable houses. The mass production of housing did not liberate people from residential mediocrity, as Depression-era visionaries had hoped, but

made it the national standard. In "The Transients," one of several *Fortune* articles in which sections of *The Organization Man* (1956) were originally published, William H. Whyte identified postwar suburbia with the revolutionary degradation of the individualized middle-class house into an undifferentiated unit of a nationwide "dormitory":

> For a quick twinge of superiority there is nothing quite like driving past one of the new Levittown-like suburbs. To visitors from older communities, the sight of rank after rank of little boxes stretching off to infinity, one hardly distinguishable from the other, is weird. . . . If this is progress, God help us . . . 1984. But, onlookers are also likely to conclude, one must be sympathetic too, after all, it is a step up in life for the people who live there, and one should not begrudge them the opiate of TV; here, obviously is a group of anonymous beings submerged in a system they do not understand.
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> The onlooker had better wipe the sympathy off his face. Underneath the television aerials lies a revolution. What he has seen is not the home of little cogs and drones. What he has seen is the dormitory of the next managerial class.[7]

Whyte disrupts the onlookers' comfortable conviction about the inferior beings who inhabit these houses, challenging as well their assumption about where the middle class must presumably live. What the onlookers and, by implication, the *Fortune* readers see are embryonic versions of themselves, not the factory crowd climbing a dubious ladder of success but the descent of office cohorts into the mass. Whyte notes the observers' smugness, but then indicates that they should feel neither superiority nor sympathy but perhaps something closer to self-pity. The putative erosion of class boundaries in the postwar period, or, alternatively, the celebration of a capitalist society that had made everyone middle class, is here working in a different direction. Many postwar intellectuals enthusiastically articulated a version of the claim made by *Harper's* editor Frederick Allen that "the dynamic logic of mass production" had at last fulfilled the promise of the twenties and made elites of the masses. Higher wages and lower prices had lifted "millions of families . . . from poverty or near poverty to a status where they can enjoy what has been traditionally considered a middle-class way of life" that included refrigerators, cars, and sometimes and with increasing frequency, houses.[8] For Whyte as well as for Wilson, it demonstrated that masses had been made of the elites.

The suburb of the mass middle class is to postwar sociology and literature what the slum was to the Chicago school between the world wars and to proletarian fiction of the Depression. Nelson Algren's "army of . . . homeless" was erased, first by an army of real soldiers, and later by an army of men in gray flannel suits.[9] As in the case of Wright and the Chicago school, postwar literature and sociology were not merely complementary. Postwar sociologists attended to literary representations of

the phenomena they sought to describe, while novelists adopted quasi-sociological techniques in fiction dealing with the suburbs. Even novels that do not claim to be defining a new breed of postwar suburban American through characters named John and Mary Drone profess to be portraying the "typical commuter," or employ the statistical tone of social science to describe and deflate suburban activities: "Afternoon floated by, and the sun dropped low, and some five thousand automatic stoves were switched on while some five thousand wives cooked dinner for some five thousand returning husbands."[10] The preponderance of popular novels that borrow from and mimic sociology suggests the power of the assumption that the postwar suburb was producing a new kind of American and that novelists felt themselves to be actively participating in its construction and elaboration. The typical suburbanite became a way of demarcating within literary texts the massification of the middle class and also, unlike an earlier archetype such as Babbitt, of linking it to the deterioration of status and social privilege.

Tom Rath's renowned attire, as well as the house, register just these changes, and the title gestures toward Wilson's own sociological ambition to delineate an American type. According to C. Wright Mills, the wearing of street clothes on the job is an important psychological resource for the white-collar worker, the last vestige of status that has been eroded by his or her dependent and inglorious place within the corporation.[11] By the end of the third chapter, Tom grimly reflects that the gray flannel suit is "[t]he uniform of the day" (11); the symbol of his affluence is also the symbol of his subordination. Junior executive positions in large corporations, like houses in the suburbs, provide no social guarantees.

Sociologically speaking, the postwar suburb is the residential analogue of the national corporation; when Whyte analyzed "the organization," he referred to a place of residence as well as a place of work. Organization men (and in the suburb, women as well) are "the ones who have left home, spiritually as well as physically, to take the vows of organization life" (3). Whyte declined to offer "any strictures against ranch wagons, or television sets, or gray flannel suits" (11), the usual trappings of postwar conformity, because commodities are "irrelevant" (11) as anything but symptoms of the real problem: a new managerial class that considers "belonging" to be the highest personal and social good. It turns to the corporation and the suburb for a new "home," finding it through something that exacerbates the crisis—"the deep emotional security that comes from total integration with the group" (36)—rather than a private refuge that respects the individual.[12] In "The Suburban Dislocation," Riesman cited "aimlessness" rather than "conformity" as the central problem of the suburb. The suburb is designed to privilege home over work so as to pretend that the meaninglessness of modern white-collar work does not

matter. The home cannot be a satisfactory alternative until work itself is rehabilitated; understanding the connection between "meaningful work" and a meaningful home is necessary to disconnect them.[13]

The material artifacts of suburban life are ultimately immaterial because the consumption of mass-produced housing and products does not create, nor abstinence resolve, the crisis caused by the bureaucratic construction of mass middle-class men. For both Riesman and Whyte the suburb replicates the homelessness it is supposed to alleviate, especially for business and professional men. Thus in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), Riesman argued that they suffer from "the night shift" (141), what Whyte called the "business stream of consciousness" (163): the psychological labor of anxiety about work that persecutes men in their sanctuary, a phenomenon we saw briefly in *Babbitt*. Anthropologists Roy Lewis and Rosemary Stewart similarly reported that for top managers, the home is not a place of rest or refuge: "If they do not take work home in their briefcases, they almost certainly take it home in their heads."[14] In these scenarios, the postwar home is the double of the office, a site of, not a relief from, white-collar work—a castle, perhaps, but one ruled by a nervous and unhappy king.

Whyte's classic sociological description and Wilson's best-selling literary treatment of corporate-suburban culture, both published by Simon and Schuster in the midfifties, as well as the work of Mills, Riesman, and others, point to a trend that has gone largely unremarked even in recent revisionary studies that have challenged the prevailing view of the fifties as a "culture of complacence" and "consensus placidity."[15] The middle classes—particularly male members of what came to be called the professional-managerial class (PMC)—were identified as the preeminent victims of postindustrialization and suburbanization; their complacency was presumed to be the riskiest and most unwarranted.[16] "[D]islocation" was their paradigmatic postwar experience: "Insecurity, instability, and maladjustment . . . replace the security, stability, and social adjustment which have traditionally been the pillars of middle-class position in our society."[17] The postwar period arguably dislocated everyone, but that case was not really made, or rather, as the previous quotation from Allen suggests, whatever dislocation the working classes experienced was as the fortunate beneficiaries of postwar economic and social changes that were supposed to have dissolved many of the visible boundaries between social classes. But articles in popular periodicals with titles such as "The Middle Class, Alas!" and "Our Fear Ridden Middle Classes," as well as *White Collar* (1951) and *The Lonely Crowd*, argued that white-collar work now replicated or surpassed the dependent, dehumanizing, and impersonal conditions of most blue-collar labor and was no longer necessarily better paid. The salaried middle class had become "the new little people" and

"the most kicked around class in this country."[18] As every white-collar
worker was reinvented as the factory slave of the fifties, including and
even especially the corporate manager and executive, the term *alienation*
was increasingly invoked to describe the effects of white-collar work,
which brings "the alienation of the wage-worker from the products of
his work . . . one step nearer to its Kafka-like completion. The salaried
employee does not make anything. . . . No product of craftsmanship can
be his to contemplate with pleasure as it is being created and after it is
made" (Mills xvi–xvii). Working only with people, paper, and symbols,
all white-collar employees are alienated from their labor in a way that the
factory worker handling concrete things, in however small or uncon-
nected a way, could never be.[19]

According to Mills, white-collar workers do not realize their plight be-
cause of their paradoxical situation: they "may be at the bottom of the
social world" but are "at the same time gratifyingly middle class" (xii).
Hovering between a less than satisfactory postwar present and past
"dreams of glory" (68), between the obscurity of the uniform and the
entitlement implied by the gray flannel suit, Tom embodies the experience
of middle-class dislocation. As a "fable of the 'tense and frantic' '50s,"
Man in Gray Flannel was thought successfully to impart "the panicky
quality of the lives of so many of those commuters in gray flannel," even
if one critic surmised that the difficulty of caring for a family on $7,000
a year "must be less than heartbreaking to the average reader."[20] The
question that the question mark in the living room raises is how can they
reclaim (maintain) their social privilege?

Unlike the benighted figures that populate the sociologies, whether
Whyte's cheerful belonger, Riesman's "glad-hand[er]" (141), or Mills's
white-collar drone, the man in the gray flannel suit and his wife are pro-
foundly aware of and invested in their anguish. And while sociologists
tended to focus on the psychological, economic, and political impotence
of the new middle classes, Wilson's literary-sociological project recovers
from the putative disintegration of social privilege the rewarding basis for
a new middle-class identity grounded in its resistance to the institutions
that are so crucial to it. The corporation and the suburb may not enable
affluence, success, happiness, or any other mushy term associated with
the postwar search for the elusive "good life," but in allegedly victimizing
the protagonists, they offer Tom and Betsy opportunities to redefine them-
selves in terms of their absolute superiority to those institutions most iden-
tified with the degradation of the middle class. In *Babbitt*, Lewis por-
trayed feeling bad about being middle class as a constitutive feature of
white middle-class identity, a feeling that made Babbitt vaguely ashamed.
In *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, discontent is pushed to the next
level: being middle class means *denying* that they are middle class, and

shame gives way to a pleasant conviction of how exceptional they are. The Raths' sense of self does not come through Tom's job or the couples' house and family or their roles as consumers. Rather, *Man in Gray Flannel* insists that they can define themselves only by repudiating their middle-classness, in what becomes a dominant fictional paradigm of white middle-class experience in the postwar period. Other people belong in a development, not us; everyone else is happy as a corporate drone, except for me. And their fundamental dissatisfaction with the suburb and the corporation proves an engine of mobility that frees them from the constraints of each. The moral of the novel is indeed, as a reviewer mused, that "the self-pitying shall inherit the earth."[21] The Raths' fortunes imply a broader truth about postwar representations of the middle class. Thinking of oneself as a victim may be the necessary condition for not becoming one.

The Anxiety of Affluence

The protagonist of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* was billed, preposterously, as "a fairly universal figure in mid-twentieth-century America," evidence not only of exaggerated claims about postwar affluence, but also of the assumption that affluence and misery are intertwined, for he is above all the man for whom suburban-corporate existence is defined as endless suffering.[22] The real trouble begins when Tom, who works for a charitable foundation, gets a great new job in public relations at the United Broadcasting Corporation, which comes with an almost 30 percent raise in salary and the chance "to buy a better house" (6). But the connection between home and work exceeds economics. The Raths' naive assumption that a nicer house will solve their problems collapses under the revelation that the home is not a shelter from the anxieties of working for a corporation but is implicated in them. Early in the novel Tom contemplates the "four completely unrelated worlds in which he lived": "the crazy, ghost-ridden world" of his well-connected but now impoverished grandmother; "the isolated" world of war; the corporate world that employs him; and "the entirely separate world populated by Betsy" and their children, "the only one of the four worlds worth a damn. There must be some way in which the four worlds were related, he thought, but it was easier to think of them as entirely divorced from one another" (26). The certainty of disconnection becomes wishful thinking by the end; it is "easier" to see them as independent because recognizing their contingency seems to involve the potential disintegration of the only one he claims to care about.

Tom is close to being right. Shortly after he gets the new job, his grandmother dies and bequeaths him no money but an old, immense, and unsalable mansion that compounds the Raths' financial difficulties because

taxes must be paid on it and Edward, an aged servant, pensioned. At the same time, a more serious catastrophe occurs: an elevator operator at UBC "pop[s] up to form a connecting link" (98) between the war, the corporation, and the home. A former member of Tom's paratrooper unit, Caesar Gardella informs him that Tom's intense wartime romance while in Italy resulted in the birth of a son. While Caesar is trying to locate Maria, the cousin of his own wife, he asks Tom to think about arranging financial support. The news represents moral and emotional as well as economic burdens. Tom was married when he met Maria. In deciding the right thing to do, he must also consider if and how to tell Betsy about the affair. The delicate task of determining and fulfilling his economic and moral obligations, of putting these worlds in relation to one another, threatens the dissolution of the family.

While waiting several weeks in Italy for a transport plane, Tom and Maria, Caesar and Gina are, temporarily, "almost like a suburban community, with the men all working for the same big corporation" (91–92). Although Tom is Caesar's commanding officer, their army uniforms, girlfriends, and, on other occasions, the experience of common danger diminish social differences—they are more like equal coworkers and neighbors than officer and subordinate. At UBC, their respective uniforms reflect and exacerbate the now self-evident distinctions between the elevator operator and the junior executive. "[A]shamed that in addition to all the other strains involved in their relationship, he should find it awkward to have lunch with a man in an elevator operator's uniform" (155), Tom learns that working for the same big corporation back home does not necessarily entail community. But the question of hierarchy is more vexed than his embarrassment indicates. The reader is put in the unusual position of being asked to join an elevator operator in sympathizing for a young executive. Caesar tells Tom that he and his wife take turns working real night shifts to raise a family, but he is "not complaining. . . . Things have gone pretty good for us" (156). He offers this positive assessment of his own situation after Tom has made a less than gracious reply—"The breaks" (156)—to Caesar's expression of admiration for Tom's promising job at UBC. Tom appears to expect commiseration instead of congratulations and makes a bolder plea for sympathy when he answers Caesar's question about financial help for Maria with the lame confession, "I'm practically broke" (158).

At this point Tom has $9,000 in the bank, the exact equivalent of a year's salary at the new job. His gray flannel suit does not, he suggests, protect him from the vagaries of the economic world. Tom's anxious response to Caesar reflects his belief that corporate white-collar work is fundamentally insecure. Moreover, the work suggested by Tom's gray flannel uniform is not made more meaningful than the work signified by

Caesar's, and thus does not compensate him for its risks. As someone who spends two-thirds of the novel ghostwriting a speech for the corporation's president, Tom performs a job that might have been scripted by Mills and Riesman, producing only "a meaningless lifework" (130) that reduces him to "the shadow of another man" (250). But it is not really the nature of corporate employment or his work in particular that conditions his replies to Caesar. It is the novel's assumption that suffering is the inevitable by-product of affluence. Money is about fantastic obligations, not rewards, and always generates concerns about more money. The higher salary at UBC and every subsequent sign that his career is taking off, from the boss's kindly interest in him to a final, career-making promotion, bring a new crisis. Betsy hopes to follow through on their original plan to spend the extra money on a new house, but once the job is his, Tom deals with the good news by predicting imminent disaster: "With nine thousand a year, we could afford some life insurance. Did you ever stop and think what would happen to you if I dropped dead some morning?" (67). A raise seems almost tantamount to a death sentence; as the family's fortunes improve, they get increasingly precarious. Affluence never has the chance to become the source of the middle-class male's discontent, as in *Babbitt*, because Tom is incapable of perceiving himself to be materially well off. The more money and assets, the more claims made upon them, to the exaggerated extent that a needy young dependent materializes out of nowhere, and the Raths suddenly acquire a servant, not as a luxury but as a further financial burden.

Man in Gray Flannel legitimates a paradoxical truth for the PMC: anxiety and unhappiness are inevitable components of its professional and economic well-being. Nowhere is this more the case than for Judge Saul Bernstein, the son of poor South Bay delicatessen owners who achieved an "enormously powerful" (149) position in a "town notorious for its prejudice against Jews" (147). His secret? He hates what he does for a living. "He had grown reasonably rich, and respected, and might have been happy except for one thing: he detested justice almost as much as he detested violence or cruelty of any other kind" (148). Judges are the victims of justice in the novel, and the terrible responsibility of administering it always makes his stomach ache. But he is not simply a good judge who also happens to dislike justice; professional self-loathing is precisely what makes him so good at his work and so influential in the community, "for people had found that hating justice as he did, he dispensed it extremely well" (149). As the example of the judge indicates, it is not just that professional and financial success cause misery, but the misery that comes from disliking one's work propagates success. Prejudice in the town lingers—he and his wife continue to be excluded from social gatherings and country clubs—but the novel nonetheless insists that unhappiness and

even self-loathing are stronger forces for professional success than anti-Semitism is against it.

The novel pays less attention, however, to the intrinsic dissatisfactions of the independent professional's or the young executive's work than to the uncertainty of the latter's rewards. During one crisis, Tom tries to convince himself that "[y]ou can't go on worrying all the time; it has to stop someday. You can't really believe the world is insane; you have to believe everything's going to turn out all right" (181). The cure for an insane world is money. "[A]n island of order obviously must be made of money, for one doesn't bring up children in an orderly way without money, and one doesn't even have one's meals in an orderly way, or dress in an orderly way, or think in an orderly way without money. Money is the root of all order" (182). In contrast with the perception of the fifties as an era of rampant consumerism, *Man in Gray Flannel* is less interested in purchasing power than in absolute value, what the wealthiest character pooh-poohs as the false virtue of "money as such" (227). Although the passage seems to suggest that money matters because of what it can buy, the emphasis is much more on its capacity to regularize one's life than to improve one's standard of living. The point is not that one needs money to buy food or clothing but that one can neither eat nor dress "in an orderly way" without it. Certainly the possibility of "think[ing] in an orderly way" is imagined to come from a stability that money, as solid ground beneath one's feet, provides quite apart from how or whether it is spent. The dilemma is that the young managerial class needs money to survive in an insane world, but worrying about getting the money it needs may drive it crazy.

Given the concerns about inhabiting "a lunatic world" (109) and "an insane world" (299) that pervade the text, it is hardly a coincidence that Tom's public relations work at UBC is to establish the company's president, Ralph Hopkins, as the formative influence and head of a national committee on mental health, which is represented as the most serious health problem to face the country. The corporation seeks to cure the problem for which it is held to be largely responsible. In writing about the preponderance of characters who suffer from mental illness in postwar American novels, Richard Ohmann argues that affluence and the "perceived . . . softening of class lines" obscured the social contradictions of American life, which are displaced onto or thematized in these texts as widespread images of "personal illness."[23] But in its depiction of a national mental illness crisis, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* wears its social contradictions on its sleeve, although the point it makes is that not even the affluent are affluent and that mental illness is only a paycheck away.

Suburbia and Its Malcontents

To metaphorize money as "an island of order in a sea of chaos" suggests that money has usurped a function more logically associated with property. The intrinsic value of money contrasts sharply with the surprising valuelessness, financially and emotionally, of houses and land. The Raths detest their house in Westport because it makes them look shabby; they despise the grandmother's house because she squandered her savings on it. It is easy to understand Tom's selfish hatred of the house that has eaten his inheritance but not his perverse failure to perceive the commercial value of the land it sits on, "twenty-three acres of the best land in South Bay" (61), a coastal town *closer* to New York than Westport, at a time of frantic suburban development. Not even an immediate offer on the property by a shifty man in a Jaguar, who turns out to be a real-estate speculator, alerts Tom to his economic good fortune. Eventually Betsy and a wily local contractor persuade him to tear down the house and subdivide, but Tom never feels anything less than gypped at his inheritance, which is simply one more false threat to his financial security.

His peculiar blindness to the land's value, however, also seems to reflect a belief that land and house ownership are not anchors anymore. Before his grandmother's death, Tom considers the changes in South Bay since the war. Tom notes that the old mansions are dilapidated, a sign that the owners are not quite so affluent as previously, but they preserve an aura of stability in contrast with the newer houses, which are so impermanent that they seem "quite capable of disappearing as quickly as they had come" (20). And yet the very presence of the new development houses renders the decaying old mansions just as vulnerable and insubstantial as decaying new houses like the Raths'. The plan to tear down the mansion and subdivide, which will further increase the economic value and property taxes of the surrounding estates, heralds their demise as the owners are forced either to sell or subdivide themselves and portends the reinvention of the town as a development suburb like Westport.

In the final chapters, when the owner of a neighboring estate protests the Raths' now public plan to build a small subdivision, what they call a "housing project" (267), it is not only selfishness and bile that leads him almost hysterically to denounce their proposal: "if we replace the big estates with housing projects, South Bay will become a slum within ten years—a slum, I tell you, a slum!" (270).[24] Slum dwellers generally cannot afford the $25,000 asking price that Tom, Betsy, and the contractor have discussed, and so the analogy looks like a fit of rhetorical excess designed to protect the sentimental value of his property by restraining its economic value. But the word *slum* was also used by enlightened writers with a

different agenda to describe postwar suburban housing developments. Famed New York planner Robert Moses called the "fly-by-night subdivision," where greedy speculators provided housing but did not prepare for community needs, "the slums of tomorrow."[25] Critics reworked the metaphor of colonization, which sometimes framed responses to the perceived invasion of the suburbs by the city and its slums, as I have shown in relation to *Tarzan* and *Native Son*. Now suburbs were lambasted as "parasites" that fed off the central city but gave nothing in return; one writer noted that as a "twentieth-century urban empire," New York City was the "motherland" surrounded by five hundred suburban "colonies," but "unlike some colonies, these have not been 'exploited' by the parent city. Quite the contrary."[26] And yet their abuse of city resources did not mean that even "lovely oases in Westchester, Essex, Nassau" would remain undefiled: "Space disappears into subdivisions; the trains fill up; traffic thickens, parking in the village center becomes a nuisance; beaches are polluted; prices rise and taxes soar" (Laas 52). Perhaps the Raths' dilapidated house and unruly garden in Westport is supposed to say as much about the decline of the neighborhood as of their personal finances: "many suburban areas are beginning to show signs of blight and obsolescence—a sure indication that these areas will eventually become slums."[27] The "pretty" as well as the "fly-by-night" subdivision "could degenerate into the bungaloid slum of tomorrow" (Laas 53); suburban flight was but a preliminary step toward (sub)urban blight.

Other literary treatments of the postwar suburb are similarly preoccupied with the suburb as slum, with the deterioration of the just-completed housing stock and the transiency of the residents. The victims of "the fresh-air slums we're building around America's cities" (Keats xi) are not recent immigrants or African Americans like Bigger, however, but the white middle class that grew up in the stable, settled, residences of old "Elm Street" (49). *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1956) converts the protagonists into the middle-class equivalents of tenement dwellers. Stuck in "a house that could never be a home" (60), John and Mary Drone have nothing to console them but their status as owners. But Keats will not allow them even that, observing that the policy of low down payments builds equity very slowly and masks their actual financial relation to the house. Ownership under such conditions is not an investment but an affliction; the Drones are just the nominal slumlords of themselves. *Crack* ends with an extra mortgage, a third child on the way, and a real night shift for John, a petty government bureaucrat, as a salesman in a liquor store—a nightmare of downward mobility. For Mills, white-collar people have become beholden to corporations because they no longer own the property with which they work, while Keats indicts the development

house because it enslaves the white-collar families who "own" the property in which they live.

The Drones find neither a home nor social mobility in the suburb; instead they encounter mobility of a more literal kind. Suburbanites are pioneers, once again, even as they are slum dwellers: development houses "serve only as brief campsites on life's wilderness trail" (xv). Modeled after Levittown, the "Camptown" subdivision in Charles Mergendahl's *It's Only Temporary* (1950) acknowledges shabby construction and impermanent community. Even when the suburb is classy, movement is championed for its own sake. The enterprising, executive protagonist of *Sincerely, Willis Wayde* (1955), by J. P. Marquand, the dean of popular suburban fiction, switches suburban houses and abandons businesses that are "like . . . an old home to [him]," because "[y]ou've got to keep on moving and growing. That's the American way."[28] Unlike the characters in Lewis and Cain, Wayde's allegiance to mobility is utterly incompatible with a sentimental investment in either homes or corporations. When Whyte and Riesman, respectively, called the suburb a "dormitory" and a "fraternity," they pointed to the transitoriness of suburban life as well as its communal quality.[29] As the titles *It's Only Temporary* and "The Transients" suggest, in the postwar period suburban house ownership and transiency were frequently aligned rather than opposed.

The postwar suburb exemplified the real meaning of white middle-class homelessness. In *Crack* and *It's Only Temporary*, the protagonists are represented as impotent victims of rapacious real estate speculators, government largesse, nosy neighbors, and the houses themselves. *Man in Gray Flannel* decisively translates suburban anguish into empowerment. The development suburb is a breeding ground of alienated homeowners who need only to capitalize upon their dissatisfaction to move up and out. In the first chapter, Betsy feels somewhat guilty about their resentment and tries to talk Tom and herself out of it: "I don't know what's the matter with us. . . . Your job is plenty good enough. We've got three nice kids, and lots of people would be glad to have a house like this. We shouldn't be so *discontented* all the time" (5). In noting that the house and job are good enough for others, Betsy indicates that they are not really good enough for them. But her conceit that many other people would be satisfied with what she and Tom spurn is undone by evidence of rampant discontent among their neighbors. Discontent is, in fact, the driving force of the Raths' subdivision, a place not to settle in but to escape. Family finances are openly discussed with neighbors, and people celebrate salary increases and the chance "to buy a bigger house" with "moving-out parties" (121). People are public about their ambition to leave; it is a community that rallies around its own disappearance.

Residents treat the subdivision not as "a permanent stop," but "a cross-roads where families waited until they could afford to move on to something better" (120). Maybe "lots of people" would appreciate their house, but no one who lives in one just like it does. A few residents consider the neighborhood "a desirable end of the road," but they are treated as social outcasts: "On Greentree Avenue, contentment was an object of contempt" (121). Tom and Betsy's dissatisfaction is normal and connected with the ability to get out. The concern is that they face a debilitating immobility—the prospect that "the house with the crack in the form of a question mark on the wall and the ink stains on the wallpaper was probably the end of their personal road" (6). The frightening possibility here is not that they are irrationally dissatisfied, but that they are not discontented enough.

No dissatisfaction, the example of Greentree Avenue suggests, no mobility. Discontent is crucial to the achievement and preservation of middle-class economic and social privileges. And yet the Raths are also concerned to make their discontent pay a kind of cultural dividend. When Betsy tries to console herself by saying that "lots of people" would appreciate their house, even though they do not, she is tacitly separating them from the crowd, refusing to settle for what is merely good enough for others. Thinking about their desire to move, she makes a standard complaint about suburban uniformity—"It's not fair to the children to bring them up in a neighborhood like this. . . . It's *dull*" (68)—but upon further reflection changes her mind: "It's not dull enough—it's tense and it's frantic. Or, to be honest, Tom and I are tense and frantic, and I wish to heaven I knew why" (121). As she instinctively realizes, their neighbors are indeed as tense and frantic as they, motivated by the same desire for better jobs and better houses. In revising her criticism, she denies her connection with the others. They are only dull, but she and Tom are anxious. Betsy generously concedes that "[n]o one here is evil," nor is the neighborhood "a bad place to be," and she tells herself that "[t]here's nothing wrong with"(121) the culture of Greentree Avenue, with the cocktail parties, harmless flirtations, and dreams of a farm in Vermont, but if that were really the case she wouldn't be at such pains to deny it. As in *Babbitt*, complacency is regarded as the norm that is violated by one's discontent, and in both instances, discontent is revealed to be widespread rather than peculiar. But unlike Babbitt, Betsy is as committed to the idea that discontent is a unique experience for them as she is to the feeling itself. Joel Pfister has observed that anxiety in the twentieth century becomes a kind of psychological status marker for the middle class. *Man in Gray Flannel* raises the stakes; anxiety is envisioned as a way of *distinguishing* oneself from the middle class.[30] Her condescension as well as her discontent are

ways of marking her and Tom's superiority to these people who are so very much like them.

Malcontents, not mindless conformists, are the fixtures of both their housing development and postwar suburban literature more generally. In *It's Only Temporary*, Shelley and Don Cousins are renting a house and plan to move to Montana when Don has saved up enough to go into business. That their situation is "only temporary" convinces them of their superiority to their neighbors, whom they imagine to be there for life, although virtually everyone else also seeks to move, if only at first to the newer, larger houses on the other side of the development. Shelley "had been unable to fit herself into the general run of things—into the thousands of houses all the same. . . . She wanted to fit. She wanted to be like Mamie, easygoing, content, resigned" (65). Here Shelley seems to exemplify Whyte's social ethic, the belief that belonging is a "moral imperative" (437). But wishing that you could belong is also a way of unequivocally expressing that you cannot belong, that no matter how much you would like to fit into the suburb, you are simply too unconventional. The novel ends with the Cousinses still locked away in their "temporary jail" (159), now as owners, the move to Montana indefinitely, and one presumes eternally, postponed. They are, in effect, transients who will never get to move, their only solace that even if they spend the rest of their lives in Camptown, they both know that their real home is someplace else.

Betsy's and Shelley's discontent is importantly distinguished from Betty Friedan's now classic description of the fifties suburban housewife, going about her duties, "afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—'Is this all?' "[31] As imagined by male novelists, the problem is not that they are bored with the housewife's labors and jealous of their husband's interesting work in the city, the substance of Myra Babbitt's discounted complaints. They are primarily dissatisfied with the culture of the suburb rather than their conventional role within it. They perform work of a kind that is significant to them and unrelated to housework and consumption: they strive to make themselves and their husbands more meaningful than their neighbors.

But if, as I have demonstrated, discontent with the culture of conformity is not envisioned as the uniformly masculine problem that Barbara Ehrenreich has claimed, nor yet is it the woman's unique obligation.[32] In Jack Finney's classic science fiction novel, *The Body-Snatchers* (1955), the Marin County town of Santa Mira fights the construction of a new highway that would spoil its "quiet residential quality," but the desire for isolation doesn't prevent space pods from sacking the village.[33] In effect the pods supplant the highway as a vehicle of undesirable suburbanization; while the residents sleep they are replaced with affectless, conformist

duplicates who immediately cease to take care of their property: "In seven blocks we haven't passed a single house with as much as the trim being repainted, not a roof, porch, or even a cracked window being repaired" (108–9). With the help of medication, Miles Bennell and Becky Driscoll fight to stay awake and to preserve their individuality. The novel also acknowledges, however, the attraction of ceasing the struggle: "the idea of sleep, of just dropping my problems and letting go; letting sleep pour through me . . . it was shocking to realize how terribly tempting the idea was" (159). For Miles, the desire to just let go, to be rid of "strain and worry" (162), to be "still Miles Bennell" (159) and yet also just like everyone else, expresses the profound appeal of a release from the tremendous burden of maintaining one's individuality in the face of constant threats to it. The suburb requires eternal and exhausting vigilance to preserve one's integrity against it.

Unlike the term *city dweller*, which designates only a place of residence, *suburbanite* implies that where you live has something to do with who you are—it purports to be an identity category. Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road* (1961), set in 1955, concerns a suburban couple who is obsessed with just this relation between environment and essence. "Economic circumstances might force you to live in this environment, but the important thing was to keep from being contaminated. The important thing always was to remember who you were."[34] Just who are the Wheelers? It isn't exactly clear, except that we know that they are not *really* suburbanites, at least if we are to trust their self-assessment; they are just people who happen to live in a suburb. But in *Revolutionary Road*, the suburb is treated as a living space that is in constant danger of contaminating you, of turning you into something you're not—someone who belongs there. As in *The Body-Snatchers*, the suburb "destroy[s] our personalities" (29). When Frank and April Wheeler first moved there, they "wanted something out of the ordinary—a small remodeled barn or carriage house, or an old guest cottage—something with a little charm" (28), but the realtor explains that it is impossible to find that sort of thing anymore: it's just what everyone who moves there wants. They befriend a couple with whom they exchange "anecdote[s] of supreme suburban smugness" about their neighbors, "the idiots [Frank] ride[s] with on the train everyday" (60). Their conversation is dedicated to distinguishing themselves as an "embattled, dwindling, intellectual underground" (59) against the culture of the typical lawn-mowing, barbecuing, development suburbanite, but as the quotation suggests, their disaffection also makes them "suburban." *Revolutionary Road* brilliantly defines the postwar suburbanite as the antisuburbanite, whose existence is a protest against everyone else's putative conformity.

The problem of remembering "who you were" emerges in another post-war novel that helps to illuminate the difference between representations of the white and black middle class in literature of the period. The protagonist of *Invisible Man* has white-collar aspirations, and his landlady instructs him to remember his origins and his people: "Up here too many forgits. They finds a place for theyselves and forgits the ones on the bottom" (255). She is urging him not only to be "a credit to the race," but also to continue to identify with those at the bottom of the nation's economic hierarchy, once his personal ambitions have been fulfilled, rather than to remember and assert an essential superiority to a middle-class future. The feared alienation of the black middle class from the working class resonates with E. Franklin Frazier's famous, contemporaneous criticisms in *Black Bourgeoisie*. He notes the isolation of the black middle class, which is scorned by the white middle class and in turn scorns the "black masses" with whom it desperately fears being associated. Even though it has access to a rich folk culture, unlike its white counterparts, it is afraid to draw on that heritage and devotes itself instead to "fatuities" (98), primarily conspicuous consumption, through which it attempts to distinguish itself from the black working class.[35] Bob Jones, the protagonist of Chester Himes's brilliant, underrated *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) notes "that look of withered body and soul" in his fiancée's mother, the wife of the most prominent black physician in Los Angeles.[36] The Wellingtons live in a segregated, upper-middle-class neighborhood that is "clean, quiet, well-bred"(49) and surround themselves with expensive furniture and rugs, while complaining how "hard" recent black migrants from the South "make it . . . for the rest of us" (52). That is, the behavior and values of recent working-class arrivals reflect badly on such people as they, who have "earn[ed] their equality" (52). Bob Jones despises their "smug and complacent" manner, willful blindness to the daily realities of racism, and the determination, shared by his social-worker fiancée, that he "join the ranks of Negro professionals"(51) and become one of "us." His job as a shipyard worker is too unambitious for the family, too inferior to his abilities, and too close to the working-class migrants whom they disdain.

Without the luxury of racial inclusion, black middle-class identity is imagined in these brief examples to find a fragile foundation in its superiority to the black working class. White middle-class identity, on the other hand, is typically represented in suburban literature of the postwar period as a disavowal of the things that would seem to make it middle class. The white middle class asserts its superiority to itself in the belief that middle-classness has been devalued. The result is not to identify with or emulate white workers—that association is part of the problem—but rather to lay claim to one's nonconformity.[37] In *Growing Up Absurd* (1960), Paul

Goodman marked the failure of the resolutely nonconformist Beat generation to achieve its goal of purposeful self-differentiation—"Their behavior is a conformity *plus royaliste que le roi*"—and that it more nearly approximated the banality of the "organized system" than challenged it.[38] Irving Howe similarly commented that the Beats were "at one with the middle-class suburbia they think they scorn."[39] Howe's description might serve just as well to describe the suburbanites themselves, except he imagines a difference between being "at one" with the suburb and really scorning it. Organization men and women spurn the suburbs as heartily as anyone else by self-consciously claiming not to "belong" to them.

In *It's Only Temporary*, Don Cousins eventually chooses to belong to the suburb and the corporation; his boss persuades him that he is "by nature, a prospective executive in a large company" and "should, for his own as well as the world's sake" (150), heed that higher calling and give up on Montana. After the work he has always ridiculed is gratefully rewarded with praise and a promotion, Frank Wheeler of *Revolutionary Road* chickens out of their plan to move to Paris and recommits himself to the belief that he and April might belong to "a world of handsome, graceful, unquestionably worthwhile men and women who had somehow managed to transcend their environment—people who had turned dull jobs to their own advantage, who had exploited the system without knuckling under to it" (217). To the end he believes in manipulation without capitulation. Cynicism shall set them free. Tom finds his only comfort in self-pity, even though *Man in Gray Flannel* is the only novel that translates discontent into actual mobility. During his commute one day, he decides that he must conform to the values of both the suburb and the corporation:

> [N]ow is the time to raise legitimate children, and make money, and dress properly, and be kind to one's wife, and admire one's boss, and learn not to worry. . . . I'm just a man in a gray flannel suit. I must keep my suit neatly pressed like anyone else, for I am a very respectable young man. . . . I will go to my new job, and I will be cheerful, and I will be industrious, and I will be matter-of-fact. I will keep my gray flannel suit spotless. I will have a sense of humor. I will have guts—I'm not the type to start crying now. (109)

If this doesn't count as crying, it's not clear what would. The passage derides most of the things that have come to be associated with the postwar worldview: the importance of family life, ambition in the corporate world, the pursuit of affluence. But it doesn't deride in order to reject; Tom's contempt is mainly reserved for himself and not the things he strives for. Neither quiescent belonging nor canny exploitation are tenable in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. The qualities of being "respectable,"

"cheerful," and "industrious" really just stand for the vice of selling out to the corporation.

At the end of the novel, when Tom rejects the big promotion he is offered on behalf of a quality home life, he has been presumed to speak for the suburban home that sustains the person and family over the corporation that annihilates them.[40] But in reality, Tom never risks his soul because the United Broadcasting Corporation is ultimately presented as a beneficent enterprise that never asks him to. By representing himself as the object of the corporation's malign intentions, he is able to thrive within it and distinguish himself from it. In precisely the same way that the suburb is represented as a contaminant that threatens to turn exceptional white people into unremarkable suburbanites, the corporation signifies for the Raths a moral hazard that threatens to corrupt the virtuous. And like the suburbanite who fantasizes about his or her incorruptibility, asserting cultural superiority to the suburb by repudiating it, the neophyte executive affirms his moral superiority by constructing the elaborate fiction that the corporation demands he sacrifice it. In *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, the suburb and the corporation work together to offer Tom and Betsy endless confirmation of their own integrity.

Public Relations and the Personality Market

In addition to the feeling of economic insecurity that accompanies his raise at UBC, Tom is plagued by moral doubts about the nature of public relations work. For Mills and Riesman, public relations is paradigmatically alienated white-collar work; it not only entails working with people and symbols rather than things but is one step further removed from material labor: it symbolizes the symbols, performing "the interpretive justification of the new powers to the underlying outsiders" (Mills 95). In contrast with advertising, public relations sells things indirectly by creating favorable images of a company, an industry, or business in general to promote "goodwill and understanding" toward them.[41] Tom cannot understand why a man as busy and powerful as the president of UBC would be interested in mental health. Is the public relations agenda, whether for UBC or for Hopkins himself, incompatible with a "sincere" desire "to do some good" (33)? Are public relations and sincerity inherently opposed?

The question of Hopkins's sincerity troubles Tom because he is already concerned about his own. At the initial interview, he chafes "at the need for hypocrisy" (13) when asked why he wants to work there. He wants only to make more money but lies about his motives: " 'The salary isn't the primary consideration with me,' Tom said, trying desperately to come up with stock answers to stock questions" (13). Being hired by the corpo-

ration means figuring out what it wants to hear, which is also paramount
in the autobiography that he is asked to write as part of the application.
He has one hour and no guidelines, except for a final sentence that begins
"The most significant fact about me is that I . . . " (14). Tom devises
several items that are true but unappealing, rejecting each in turn. The
autobiography should not reveal who he is but what image of himself he
can invent and how well he can sell it to the corporation; it is, in effect,
an exercise in personal public relations, and, from Tom's perspective, it
is basically dishonest.

The necessity of selling one's self to the corporation was one of the
most lamentable aspects of white-collar work for postwar sociologists,
who decried the rise of the "personality market" (Mills 225), in which
people are newly required to sell themselves by marketing attractive im-
ages of themselves. Alienation from the products of one's labor was far
less alarming than the alienation of the laborer from him- or herself. As
one expositor of the "national character" put it in 1955, the American
personality was the final frontier, "a raw material to be developed and
exploited, in a manner analogous to any other raw material. . . . A person
incapable of 'selling' him or herself is badly handicapped."[42] Riesman
similarly argued that the bureaucratic order creates the market for a new
"product": "a personality" (46). The effect of marketing the personality
is to evaporate the psychical boundary between self and other. In the thir-
ties, self-help guru Dale Carnegie famously advised readers in his *How to
Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) to "get the other person's point
of view and see things from his angle as well as from your own."[43] Ries-
man's description of other-direction identifies two changes from the ear-
lier formulation: it is now internalized—one does not need to be told to
get someone else's point of view—and the other guy's point of view is
no longer adopted in addition to one's own. His angle has become your
angle.

Mills also emphasized self-estrangement as one of the fundamental
structural changes in the white-collar personality: "To sell himself is to
turn himself into a commodity" (153). Public relations was itself used as
a metaphor for understanding the change. "What began as the public and
commercial relations of business have become deeply personal: there is
a public-relations aspect to private relations of all sorts, including even
relations with oneself" (187).[44] The neat collapse of relations with the
public into public relations, which then structure one's relations with inti-
mates and, most intimate of all, oneself, theorizes the development of a
self whose very identity is collapsing with its projection.

Man in Gray Flannel refutes a fundamental premise of postwar white-
collar sociology—the idea that selling an image of one's self necessarily
entails the alienation of that self. Although Tom decides against giving his

real reason for seeking a job at UBC, he is absolutely clear about what it is. The novel distinguishes between the image of himself he wishes to portray and the self that reflects upon and makes choices about the nature of that image. Insofar as public relations is about image, not essence, about images that are often designed to deflect attention from or conceal essences, his is a classic PR exercise. Just as UBC does not become a charitable foundation because its president dabbles in mental health, Tom does not cease to be who he is just because he decides to mislead his future employers about who he is.

But in the end, he doesn't even mislead them. Tom's autobiography comprises some basic facts that are standard for any job application but revises the only requirement: "From the point of view of the United Broadcasting Corporation, the most significant fact about me is that I am applying for a position in its public-relations department, and after an initial period of learning, I probably would do a good job. I will be glad to answer any questions which seem relevant, but after considerable thought, I have decided that I do not wish to attempt an autobiography as part of an application for a job" (17). In a sense the autobiography reveals far more than he lets on, not that he has applied for a job in public relations but that he is unwilling to market himself to attain it. Put another way, what he markets, intentionally or not, is his honest resistance to what he perceives as the corporation's demand that he market himself.

To his surprise, Tom is interviewed again and eventually gets the job. He becomes a PR man by refusing to subject himself to its operations. Honesty *is* the best policy, but he struggles throughout the novel with the conviction that honesty will get him fired. The crisis comes when he has to critique the final draft of the speech that Hopkins has rewritten, which reads exactly like an advertisement, all jingles and repetitions, ending with the slogan "Yes, our wealth depends on mental health!" (201). Tom reflects that a "few years ago" he would have told the truth about the speech but now believes that a "frank opinion often leads directly to the street" (201–2). Honesty is a luxury he cannot afford because it means unemployment and homelessness, the usual kind, or so he imagines.

This deception—about the corporation's response to honesty and his proximity to the street—allows him to invent himself as the compromised businessman, victimized by a system that demands he sell out. "I should quit if I don't like what he does, but I want to eat, and so, like a half million other guys in gray flannel suits, I'll always pretend to agree, until I get big enough to be honest without being hurt. That's not being crooked, it's just being smart" (202). But even as Tom congratulates himself on his clever manipulation of the system, he recognizes that dishonesty and cynicism take an inevitable toll on the spirit. Tom knows the truth, although he won't act upon that knowledge, and "feel[s] lousy"

(202) on behalf of his own deeper integrity. Cynicism is evidence not of a hardened character but of a character whose weakness is evidence of its moral strength. The corporate yes-man's is the soul in anguish. His anguish and good intentions enable him to experience a kind of alienated self-appreciation. When he tells Betsy, with cynical detachment, that he plans to feel out Hopkins's opinion of the speech before giving his own, she attacks him for his smug, "self-satisfied" (205) approach to the problem. She claims not to care what Tom tells him but resents his tone; it's okay to be dishonest, but you must at least honestly regret it.

Men in gray flannel are cynical about the prospect of lying to their bosses, while their wives experience "moral indignation" (207) at their husbands' equivocations. These are gendered strategies for coping with the organization, but more important is that both are represented as redemptive evidence of moral superiority in which each takes pleasure. Like Betsy, Tom does not particularly mind the indignation so much as he resents that she "enjoy[s]" it. Their way of defending themselves against the corporation, as against the suburb, is by demonstrating to themselves that they are above it. Cynicism allows the executive to capitulate to the corporation while preserving the integrity of a person who is forced to do so against his will. Moral indignation allows the executive's wife to permit him to capitulate, while reassuring herself that such tactics would be unnecessary if she were the employee; she is superior to both the corporation and her husband.

For Betsy evinces her own powerful commitment to honesty as well, the primary virtue to which domestic life must aspire. She decides that the family must be purified of the corrupting influences of postwar suburban culture. That means no more hot dogs and hamburgers—"I'm going to start making stews and casseroles and roasts and things" (73)—family readings instead of television, church on Sundays, and erect posture. The "new regime" (72) is represented not as the imposition of unnatural habits, but as the reassertion of a neglected regime that will enable them to live an honest life: "We ought to start doing the things we believe in" (74). The problem with hot dogs isn't that they are less tasty than stews, or even that they fail to embody the wifely and maternal attention of the stew, the commercial and sentimental imperatives of a Mildred Pierce, although Betsy's concern about the family's bad habits does reflect a certain insecurity about her role as its caretaker. Rather, the Raths are a stew family that has been living falsely as a hot dog family, and they must be true to their deeper nature. It is time to remember who they are. To eat hot dogs when you really ought to be eating stews is not only dishonest, self-violating, it is also crazy. She announces her plan to the family by saying that "[w]e're going to start living *sanely*" (73). Money is the "root

of all order," but honesty is also crucial to the preservation of a sane life against a "lunatic world."

In their way, the Raths are as committed to battling phoniness as is Holden Caulfield, the teen icon of fifties nonconformity. A generation of early critics treated Holden as the archetypal adolescent, whose heroic rejection of the compromises of adulthood drives him "berserk."[45] In other words, honesty and sanity are ultimately opposed in *The Catcher in the Rye*; put in less universalizing terms, Holden seems to be helplessly trapped between the mental institution from which he produces his narrative and the "lunatic world" of the inexorable corporate-suburban culture of the fifties.[46] The Raths, on the other hand, are allowed to grow up and reclaim their integrity, to triumph over the forces that would corrupt them, while making honesty pay. Once Tom is rewarded for his honesty with a lucrative job, he ought to have learned that money is conveniently the compensation for one's honesty. Instead, honesty in the business world continues to be cast as the ultimate risk with no market value: Tom "can't imagine being honest and getting a raise for it" (206). Cynicism and indignation are both red herrings, however, because Tom is wrong about what the system wants and what it will pay for. He remains committed to the belief that the corporation demands he sell out, because only then does his integrity count for anything. The corporation requires no compromises, but by all means, think of yourself as refusing to compromise and get the moral credit of rebelling against the system that rewards your rebellion.

After much soul-searching, he tells Hopkins that the speech is empty and advises him to come up with some concrete solutions to mental health problems. Hopkins, too, can speak the truth. He replies that he knows nothing about mental health but realizes that Tom is right nonetheless. Hopkins knows publicity, and that is precisely the knowledge wanted to launch the campaign and solve the problem. The speech that has been selling mental health must begin to sell Hopkins. And Hopkins's appreciation of Tom's honesty convinces Tom of his good intentions: "I was completely honest with him, and I think he was with me. . . . [H]e showed me he's completely sincere about wanting to do something about mental-health problems. All this talk about his starting this committee just for a publicity build-up is a lot of nonsense" (224). It is at the moment that Hopkins decides to make the speech all about publicity that Tom decides that the committee is not about publicity. It really concerns essence, not image. The committee is perfect public relations because it is perfectly sincere.[47]

The result of the conversation is a speech that blames the public for not knowing enough about mental health. The public is the problem, but as the mediator between it and the medical profession, mass culture is the

solution. This is the novel's only representation of the mass culture indus-
try in action, a force for good, not for profit, represented by a leader
whose commitment to social service enfolds and ennobles the industry as
a whole. It does not dupe or manipulate the public, as many commenta-
tors argued, but educates it sensibly, for its benefit.[48] It is an industry less
of mass culture than of mass communication, "whose business it is to
transmit information to the public" (240). Tom's honest efforts redeem
the corporation; it is no longer inimical to preserving the sanity of the
middle class, but crucial to it.

Once the mental health committee is launched, Hopkins decides to pro-
mote Tom to his personal assistant because of Tom's ability to "look at
things straight" (246) and "the honesty of [his] approach" (248). Tom
gives it a try but is put off by the hard work, the travel, and the prospect
of a transfer to California. Hopkins senses his resistance and asks if he
still wants to learn the business. Once again, despite all evidence to the
contrary, Tom vacillates needlessly between honesty and equivocation.
He confesses that he doesn't want to be "a big executive. I'll say it frankly:
I don't think I have the willingness to make the sacrifices. I don't want to
give up the time. I'm trying to be honest about this. I want the money.
Nobody likes money better than I do. But I'm just not the kind of guy
who can work evenings and week ends and all the rest of it forever" (277).
As William Whyte pointed out in an exasperated reading of the scene:
"The boss should be damn well ashamed of himself. As Rath implies so
strongly, when the younger men say they don't want to work too hard,
they feel that they are making a positive moral contribution as well"
(146). But the real moral contribution seems to come from Tom's commit-
ment to being honest about not wanting to work hard, to the fantasy that
honesty is a tremendous risk even though it has served him so well in the
past. What passes for morality in the novel is simply describing how one
honestly feels in anticipation that the corporation will punish it, as though
executives really had to choose between honesty and the street.

Honesty carries the day, again, as he is rewarded with his old job in a
new and improved form. Hopkins wants to donate his mansion in South
Bay, where Tom and Betsy have moved, as a site for the new mental health
foundation: "That would be quite nice for you—you wouldn't even have
any commuting. How would you like to be director of the outfit? That
job would pay pretty well. I'd like to think I had a man with your integrity
there, and I'll be making all the major decisions" (278). Tom's previous
boss, who warned him against corporate indifference, was wrong; the
corporation is a charitable foundation after all. If you are honest, you
don't need to work very hard; you don't really need to work at all. Hon-

esty is its own responsibility, and its intrinsic value to the corporation also releases Tom from its pressures, inviting an integration of work and home.

Tom takes the invitation seriously. Mass communications in the novel is unproblematic, but personal communication is deeply fraught, and Tom decides that he must apply the lessons about honesty that he has learned in the workplace and tell Betsy the truth about his wartime affair. The point is to admit to but not regret his lapse: "Betsy, do you want me to apologize for this child?" (291) he asks incredulously. Honesty is all that counts, and Betsy accuses him of being "righteous" (292), which Tom seems to interpret as a cue. He says that Maria can't prove paternity and he can refuse support. "One more act of brutality wouldn't change the world. But I'm not going to do it. I can't do anything about the state of the world, but I can put my own life in order. . . . This is one decent thing I'm going to do, if I never do anything else, and I hope you'll help me" (293). As Betsy recognizes, Tom uses the illegitimate child to establish his moral authority at home. Caring for the illegitimate child is decent, but it has less to do with accepting responsibility for conditions he created in the world than to order his own life against its insanity.

Betsy flees the house, furious and hysterical, but when she returns a few hours later, honest communication has carried the day: "Tonight while I was driving alone, I realized for the first time what you went through in the war, and what different worlds we've been living in ever since. I'm sorry I acted like a child" (299). Tom's confession produces Betsy's apology: she is responsible for their past inadequacies as a couple; she failed to intuit that behind his suffering at work and home was the experience of war. For all her moral indignation, the worlds they have been living in aren't all that different; the suburban housewife lives out a version of the corporate husband's narrative about selling out: "All I know how to do nowadays is be responsible and dutiful and deliberately cheerful for the sake of the children. And all you know how to do is work day and night and worry" (294). By embracing Tom as the victim of the home, as well as of work and war, she enables the barriers that have separated the not-so-different worlds of husband and wife to give way. She apprehends that "[i]t's not an insane world. At least, our part of it doesn't have to be. . . . We don't have to work and worry all the time" (299). Mental health doesn't really require committees or corporations, just personal communication. Now that Tom's well-paying, effortless job as head of the mental health foundation is secure, money is no longer the "island of order," nor does worry connect seemingly disparate worlds anymore. Both yield instead to the husband's integrity.

And so, by the end of the novel, the gray flannel hero has become, in his words, "an honest man" (300). Honesty is, finally, as remunerative in

the world of suburban real estate as it is in the corporate world. They have moved into the grandmother's house with the idea of tearing it down and building eighty houses on property zoned for four. The final chapter takes place in Saul Bernstein's office, where Tom has gone to arrange support for his Italian son. Thinking that Tom wants to see him about a divorce, the judge is surprised and delighted to discover that Tom is facing up to his responsibilities, has communicated them to his wife, and has her full support. "I suppose that may be a little unconventional, but to us it seems like simple justice" (303), the kind that Bernstein likes best. But Tom lets it be known that proper justice—the establishment of a permanent trust—must wait until "this housing project of ours goes through" (302). Bernstein is the deciding vote on the zoning board; if he supports the exemption, the project can go on as planned. Caring for his son is "a matter of conscience" (304), but it is also a matter of local politics. The subdivision is a moral obligation as well as a financial boon. So impressed is Bernstein with Tom's notion of "simple justice" that he offers to charge nothing for arranging child support, a pleasant bonus, but more importantly, there is no doubt that the last obstacle to the housing development has been overcome.

If bad houses can reflect poorly on their residents, then the ending of the novel just as clearly asserts that good people can reflect well on the housing they wish to build. Promoting favorable images of families, like corporations, helps to build small suburban developments as well as mass culture empires. The sociologists' solution to the problem of dislocation was "to find meaningful work for the displaced ones rather than locating still more of them in selling, public relations, and looking after each other" (*Lonely Crowd* 146), the kinds of professions with which the new middle-class worker was, according to Mills, "at home" (94). *Man in Gray Flannel* imagines instead that a public relations ethic can rebuild American middle-class life.

By turning the suburb into a family enterprise, Tom and Betsy can hope to create an environment that is as exclusive as they are. The novel ends happily, with the judge smiling out his window at a smiling Betsy, who is off with Tom for a week in Vermont. The fact that they are on the verge of temporary escape, however, suggests that their happiness still rests on an unstable foundation. It matters that the housing development is on the brink of construction and not an accomplished fact. The suburb is defined in this novel, as in many others, as an environment that must be resisted, but where resistance is what binds you most closely to it. It thus makes perfect sense that in *Man in Gray Flannel*, absolute resistance to the suburb culminates in its reproduction. And yet if discontent is the primary feature of the suburbanite, then to end with the family permanently ensconced in the suburb would be to start the cycle all over again. We do

get a small hint of what is to come. After Tom and Betsy make up, he assures her that "[w]e're not going to worry any more. No matter what happens, we've got a lot to be grateful for" (301). As Betsy herself observed, they had a lot to be thankful for way back in the first chapter. Asserting one's privileges is the first step toward denying them. Of course, a great deal has changed, but it may be that some things never change, that the suburb is destined to be the place from which one tries to escape.