

Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*

The following questions should aid you in thinking about the book's themes. Wilson's work was both popular and critically acclaimed when it was first published in 1955, and continues to this day to contribute to an understanding of life in the postwar America of the fifties.

1. Is this a book about conformity? Nonconformity? Are the Rathes conformists or are they struggling against conformity? If Tom is not the stereotypical "man in a gray flannel suit," which character(s) are?
2. For much of the story, why do Tom and Betsy have difficulty communicating?
3. How do Tom's war time experiences change him? How do Betsy's war time experiences change her? Have these changes made Tom and Betsy stronger or have their experiences diminished them?
4. Is Betsy a supportive wife? Is she ambitious? Too ambitious? Why does she criticize what she sees as Tom's lack of purpose or drive?
5. Is Tom a responsible provider for his family? Is he too careful? Too self-involved?
6. What is meant by the phrase, "On Greentree Avenue, contentment was an object of contempt?" Do Tom and Betsy seem to favor or reject the social climbing aspect of the suburban lifestyle?
7. What is your impression of fifties' corporate America, as depicted in the book? What good things did a corporate job offer? What sacrifices did such a job require?
8. Does this book change your perception of the men who went off to fight World War II, often referred to as "The Greatest Generation?"
9. Tom and Hopkins represent different generations and different kinds of men. How do their values differ? Are men like Tom living off the success and hard work of men like Hopkins?
10. Why is Hopkins's family life so unsatisfying? Who or what is to blame? How would you compare his family life to Tom's?

11. Both Tom and Hopkins must make tradeoffs to achieve their goals. What have their tradeoffs been? Who has made the better tradeoffs?
12. To what extent does Betsy challenge, confirm, or complicate stereotypes about suburban housewives in the 1950s? What about Betsy makes her seem more “genuine” than such fifties stereotypes?
13. Tom’s speech is about mental health. Arguably, however, this entire novel is about mental health broadly defined. How so?
14. Given that many couples during the 1950s likely had experiences similar to Tom’s and Betsy’s – the book was a best seller for a reason! – how can reading this novel seventy years later enable us to gain a more nuanced understanding of white middle class life in suburbia?
15. Can fiction shed light on a “larger truth” more effectively than non-fiction? Is fiction “*more real*” than a factual account? How can reading a novel about 1950s domestic life teach us more than a textbook chapter?