

## Corporate Power and the Public Good in Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the relationship between the state, the economy, and the individual in Sloan Wilson's novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955). The novel's depiction of the protagonist's experience of the military, corporate culture, and the family suggests that a functioning civil sphere depends on the family and patrimony rather than on corporate agents. At the same time, the novel draws attention to the negative impact of corporate philanthropy and public relations work on the public sphere.

KEYWORDS: Corporations in fiction; philanthropy; inheritance; public discourse

### Introduction

*The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) has predominantly been read as a piece of middlebrow fiction. For example, Catherine Jurca and, more recently, Birte Christ focus on the novel's "pattern of the success story" (Christ 21) and "the postwar representation of the middle class" (Jurca 87). Yet the novel also presents an example of 'corporate fiction'<sup>1</sup>, an heir to the kind of literature that emerged during the Gilded Age, and which criticized the rise and practices of business corporations during this era, such as Frank Norris's *The Octopus* (1901) or Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906).

By the time Sloan Wilson was writing, corporations had become representative of "the inauthenticating forces of institutions" (Cheever 194). Compared to literature from the beginning of the modern corporate era, texts of Wilson's time are less interested in the direct impact corporations have on democracy and social equality (for example, through corruption) as they are interested in the organization's impact on the individual as a member of society and, more importantly, as citizen and employee. Abigail Cheever emphasizes *Gray Flannel's* indebtedness to Cold War anxieties regarding authenticity and illustrates this aspect by comparing the novel to Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*. For this purpose, she

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<sup>1</sup> The term "corporate fiction" plays on the double meaning of fiction. On the one hand, it refers to the legal fiction of corporate personhood, on the other to literary fiction that deals with business practices and corporate life.

draws on contemporary sociological writings, such as David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) or William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956). These texts considered individualism to be replaced by uniformity, and they mourned this change.

In my own reading of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* I also want to highlight the way in which corporations in literature have come to represent one of the organizations or, more generally, associations in which individuals find themselves striving for both individual and collective welfare. While today's business corporations and their advocacy of the primacy of profit-making dominate our understanding of corporations, until the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, corporations – whether profit-oriented or non-profit – were created for the public benefit, a condition that was often formulated in their charters. As legally recognized associations<sup>2</sup>, they provided the legal and economic framework for a wide variety of enterprises, e.g. the building of a bridge or the management of an orphanage. In fact, the idea that corporations must serve the common good only began to disappear in the early twentieth century,<sup>3</sup> and *Gray Flannel* implicitly refers to this historical connection between corporations and the public welfare when somebody tells the protagonist that “‘There's been a rumor going around lately that United Broadcasting is just trying to make money and is half-hearted about improving people's minds’” (28). On the basis of this historical connection to the ‘commonweal,’ corporations occupy a special position in the public sphere. Rather than focusing on questions of authenticity and selfhood in the context of ‘corporate fictions,’ I want to investigate the field of tension between the state, the economy, and the individual which such figurations reveal in order to gain new

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<sup>2</sup> “Corporation. An artificial person or legal entity created by or under the authority of the laws of a state. An association of persons created by statute as a legal entity. The law treats the corporation itself as a person which can sue and be sued. The corporation is distinct from the individuals who comprise it (shareholders). The corporation survives the death of its investors, as the shares can usually be transferred. Such entity subsists as a body politic under a special denomination, which is regarded in law as having a personality and existence distinct from that of its several members, and which is, by the same authority, vested with the capacity of continuous succession, irrespective of changes in its membership, either in perpetuity or for a limited term of years, and of acting as a unit or single individual in matters relating to the common purpose of the association, within the scope of the powers and authorities conferred upon such bodies by law” (Black 341).

<sup>3</sup> “[B]y 1932, the old, post-Revolutionary corporate order had, it seems, so thoroughly disappeared that Adolf A. Berle and Gardiner C. Means could announce in *The Modern Corporation and Private Property* that ‘the American corporation had ... become an institution’ that ‘resembles the state in character’ and propose that it ‘serve not alone the owners ... but all society’ as if those ideas were ‘wholly new’” (Maier 81).

insights into the novel's conceptualization of private and public responsibility for the common good.

In order to explore this relationship between corporate power and public welfare I draw on Jürgen Habermas's work on the transformation of the public sphere. Habermas describes the process through which the "general interest" (53) was defined in the bourgeois public sphere of the eighteenth century and the demise of this public sphere during the nineteenth century. For Habermas it is the rise of large organizations and the concomitant change in the nature of "the process of making proceedings public (*Publizität*)" (55) which ultimately made a rational-critical debate of the public welfare extremely difficult. I argue that the novel reflects this transformation and its consequences in the United Broadcasting Corporation's power to shape public debate as well as for the protagonist's work as public relations manager. It is through the protagonist's struggle to re-integrate the disparate private and public spheres in which he was socialized – represented by the military, the business corporation, and the family – that the novel explores the conditions of possibility for the definition of the common good, as well as questions of (private) responsibility. As my analysis will show it is only in and through the family that the protagonist can reintegrate these disparate spheres and thus become a responsible member of civil society. The corporation's position in relation to the civil sphere is, by contrast, problematic at best.

### **Living in Separate Spheres**

The novel is set in the state of New York in 1953, where protagonist Tom and his wife Betsy live with their three children in a suburban home. Tom decides to apply for a job at the United Broadcasting Corporation (UBC) because he needs money to afford the kind of lifestyle that Betsy and he had pictured for themselves when they were first married. Tom is accepted, and on his first day at the office runs into a former comrade named Cesar. The encounter brings back memories of his service in the war, memories that Tom had been suppressing. The reader learns of Tom's accidental killing one of his friends in combat and of his affair with a young girl in Rome. After the death of his grandmother occurs halfway through the novel the narrative turns to Tom's family history. As Betsy and Tom decide to move into his grandmother's mansion in South Bay, hoping to make some money by selling

part of the real estate, the past catches up with them. Tom has to face his father's financial mistakes and the consequences of his own extra-marital affair in Rome. At the same time, he begins to help his new boss, Ralph Hopkins, to launch a philanthropic project, and as a result Tom begins to spend more and more time at work.

Tom's experience of the relationship between these three associations, i.e. the military, the corporation, and the family, is an experience of separate spheres, and the novel follows his struggle to integrate them. Tom's experience is conveyed in terms of an experience of time, and with an extradiegetic narrative voice. The military represents Tom's experience of a state-bureaucratic association as exclusively oriented towards the here and now: it is actively engaged in the defense of democracy, yet it has no regard for the individual and does not unite its members in pursuit of a common interest. The corporation is where Tom hopes to find a future, and in contrast to the military, it appears to highly value the individual while at the same time actively shaping and pursuing the common interest. Even more in line with the historical definition, Hopkins's philanthropic project appears to fulfill the commonwealth ideal that saw private and public interest wedded in endeavors to promote the greater good. In accordance with UBC's powerful position as media corporation and its potential influence on the public sphere, the project is devoted to the promotion of mental health. Like the military, however, the corporation actually inhibits Tom's attempts to live a fully integrated life. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator explains:

There were really four completely unrelated worlds in which he [Tom] lived [...]. There was the crazy, ghost-ridden world of his grandmother and his dead parents. There was the isolated, best-not-remembered world in which he had been a paratrooper. There was the matter-of-fact, opaque-glass-brick-partitioned world of [...] the United Broadcasting Company [...]. And there was the entirely separate world populated by Betsy and Janey and Barbara and Pete, 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. (22)

The novel tells the story of Tom's struggle to re-integrate these disconnected spheres, and it achieves this effect by using time as the central metaphor for Tom's experience. At the end of the novel, it is Tom's family that is presented as the one associational structure that allows him to incorporate past, present, and future, and thereby also to re-integrate the separate spheres.

## The Military

Tom's memories of the military bring back his sense of helplessness as a member of an organization in which he has no control and that is inconsiderate of the individual. After a particularly atrocious attack on a Japanese island, Tom, in an acute state of shell shock, attempts to find a doctor for his comrade. A fellow soldier reacts with indifference: "'You don't need no medic for this guy,' [the soldier] had said casually. 'He's been dead for hours. Put him with the other dead over there'" (93). Tom is frustrated by what he perceives as a lack of leadership and disregard for the value of individual lives, made apparent by the commanders's readiness to sacrifice the lives of hundreds of paratroopers in order to win the war when more careful and prudent planning could have saved them. In general, Tom's experience of the military is not one of a band of brothers but one in which he "is only permitted to kill strangers and friends" (125). For Tom, this is also evidence of a lack of justice or fairness in the whole military enterprise. His firsthand experience with the state-bureaucratic apparatus of the military is thus thoroughly negative.

Central to these memories is Tom's experience of the military as existing exclusively in the here and now. To him, it is an organization that, without any apparent foresight, only reacts to the needs and necessities of the present moment. Consequently, it also requires its members to disengage themselves from both past and future, and this requirement of detaching oneself from anything but the present moment also transfers to the world outside the military. Even during a one-month leave in Rome, when he spends his days and nights with his Italian mistress Maria, Tom's happiness is predicated on his self-distancing from both past and future. He permits neither thoughts of his wife Betsy nor of his probable death during the next deployment. As a consequence, Tom loses his sense of temporal order. The experience that ultimately seals this loss of a sense of continuity is when he accidentally kills a friend by throwing a hand grenade too early. When he remembers the accident, the event is caught in "an eternal present" (Bloom 409).

As [the helicopter] backed away from the island, Tom had sat in a dark corner of its hold, thinking of [his friend] Mahoney running with the grenade in mid-air, poised there forever like Keats's lovers on a Grecian urn, Hank always young and alive, the grenade always outlined clearly against the sky, just a few feet above his shoulder. (95)

Keats's lovers in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819) are depicted in the moment before the consummation of their love: they are lovers, and yet they cannot fulfil their love. This condition "can as easily be called death-in-life as life-in-death" (Bloom 408). The image of "Mahoney running with the grenade in mid-air" resonates with this same paradox. As the passage's tense suggests, Tom's memory and his experience of time are caught in the present: "Hank [is] always young and alive", the grenade never actually kills him. Stuck in the present of this moment, Tom can neither come to terms with his past nor establish continuity into the future. While Tom is not haunted by nightmares or other forms of reenactments typical of (war-related) trauma<sup>4</sup>, his experience of a rupture in temporal continuity can be read as an indication that Tom is in fact shell-shocked upon his return from the war.<sup>5</sup>

### The Corporation

In order to move forward in his life, Tom accepts a job at the United Broadcasting Corporation, thus joining an associational body that is geared towards the future. As a legal person, the corporation is – at least in theory – immortal. It potentially persists beyond the life span of individual human beings, which makes it the preferred associational structure for endowments and trusts that essentially regulate the transmission of property. In this sense and with regard to the figurative alignment of past, present and future the separate spheres of Tom's life, the corporation is the manifestation of the expansion of property into the future. In addition, UBC's mission is the education of the public and thus a direct contribution to democracy. As Ralph Hopkins puts it, "We people in the business of communication have a fundamental responsibility to bring key issues to the attention of the public" (216). Yet Tom's struggle to reintegrate the disparate spheres of his life, symbolized by his struggle to regain temporal continuity, is in effect made more difficult through his participation in the corporation's activities.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* (1996).

<sup>5</sup> The novel's concern with fatherhood and father-son-relations is also significant in this respect. In her reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*, Tiffany Joseph argues that "Shell shock is a gendered trauma that is closely linked to ideas of masculinity and femininity, and men who suffered from shell shock were frequently stigmatized as unmanly [...]. Such a charge would be doubly effective—or doubly devastating—in an era [after WWI] in which men were trying to reclaim what they thought was a lost masculine ideal" (70).

Tom is given a job in public relations as a speechwriter for Ralph Hopkins, who plans to launch a philanthropic project on mental health, that is, a campaign to inform the public about mental health issues. Hopkins's apparent sincerity and the opportunity to do "something that is useful" (7), as Betsy puts it, finally motivate Tom to put his heart into the speech. Yet the project on mental health, meant as a contribution to "the public welfare" (29), is inherently flawed. As Tom realizes, UBC is "going to sell mental health the way they sell cigarettes" (182), thereby drawing attention to the transformation of public discourse that Habermas has linked to the rise of large organizations. In his account of the public sphere in the welfare state mass democracy, Jürgen Habermas points out that "[t]he very words 'public relations work' (*Oeffentlichkeitsarbeit*) betray the fact that a public sphere must first be arduously constructed case by case, a public sphere which earlier grew out of the social structure" (55). The kind of "publicity" that is dominant in this kind of society "was established to facilitate the dealings of organizations with the state" (Habermas 55). Hopkins tells Tom pointedly that "We people in the business of communications have a fundamental responsibility to bring key issues to the attention of the public" (216). However, it is the very fact that communication has become a "business"<sup>6</sup> that, according to Habermas's argument, undermines the potential for rational-critical debate and thus for the formation of a "general interest" (Habermas 55). The corporation and other organizations of its kind have contributed to the transformation of the public sphere by taking a position between the state and the citizens.

The novel's criticism of this transformation is conveyed through the character of Hopkins, who not only represents the corporation but actually appears to *incorporate* it. The reader learns that Hopkins lives by the standard of an exaggerated work ethic, which prompts him to have his first business meetings during breakfast and to live apart from his family in an apartment in the city. Unlike the ruthless tycoons of late-nineteenth-century fiction, Hopkins is also driven by a wish to serve the public good. For him, his personal wealth implies social responsibility on a large scale. The novel suggests that this wish to serve the public is at least partly motivated by the desire for the kind of immortality that a corporation can offer

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<sup>6</sup> Catherine Jurca argues that even Walker's request that Tom write a short biography of himself can be seen as "an exercise in personal public relations" because "[t]he autobiography reveals not who he is but what image of himself he can invent and how well he can sell it to the corporation [...]" (96).

through endowments and foundations. In this regard the novel juxtaposes the kind of immortality that is achieved by virtue of endowments and foundations with the kind of immortality that is achieved through (material and spiritual) inheritance and genealogy.

The novel's ending suggests that Hopkins's belief in a future based on corporate immortality is ultimately founded on an illusion. While the corporation is indeed immortal and while Hopkins is indeed its head and face, he is nonetheless replaceable. In fact, his replaceability is essential to the corporation's longevity. The novel suggests that Hopkins, the *incorporated* individualist, fails to recognize the family as the only viable source of immortality. Already estranged from his wife, Hopkins pays little attention to his daughter until the day on which she declares that she wants to get married and enjoy life rather than go to college and work for her father. In a final effort to bring the family back together, his wife appeals to Hopkins's business persona: "You have got to give [your daughter] *time*. Put her down on your calendar. Treat her as though she were something you were a trustee of" (198). His attempt takes the shape of a prep talk on social entrepreneurship that reveals Hopkins's inability to perform as a parent and to prevent his daughter from what the novel suggests will be the first in a line of unhappy marriages. When his daughter elopes to get married to the first of her future ex-husbands, Hopkins's desire for immortality is cruelly inverted: "'The Ralph Hopkins Foundation!' [his wife] said bitterly. 'That and the headlines about your daughter's divorces will perpetuate your name'" (197). Accordingly, it is through "on one of his own company's three o'clock news broadcasts" (219) that Hopkins learns of his daughter's marriage and not by talking to her or his wife. His recognition of his failure as father (figure) and thus of his mortality becomes apparent when he is "trying to hire a son" (228) by offering Tom a new position, which Tom declines. Tom has inhabited both the present-predicated structure of the military as well as the future-oriented corporate body. In contrast to Hopkins, he is therefore able to recognize the necessity of locating the individual and the common good in an associational structure that establishes temporal continuity by securing the regulated transmission and equitable distribution of property: the family. At the same time, Hopkins's failure as a father (figure) seems to confirm what David Leverenz has observed on the nexus between corporate capitalism and paternalism: "corporate paternalism preserves the traditional norms and privileges of daddying, but more collectively, in a credit economy and a workplace hierarchy, at a spectatorial and

philanthropic distance” (33). The latter part of the novel deals with the process of Tom accepting the roles of son and father.

## The Family

However, at the beginning of the novel, Tom’s relation to his family is presented as problematic. Tom feels ill-prepared for business life on account of his family’s quasi-aristocratic lifestyle. Not only did he grow up in a mansion and went to private schools, he also grew up in the shadow of his grandfather and his father. Called “The Senator” and “The Major” respectively, the two men are identified and ultimately also reduced to their memberships in the associations in which they excelled.

Tom struggles with this patriarchal heritage. His father died when he was very young, possibly of suicide. Tom later learns that his father, a war-veteran himself, probably suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and that he squandered most of the family’s estate on the stock market. As a consequence, the transmission of patrimony (his paternal estate) is complicated on two levels. One level is material, because the family’s estate has dwindled down to a single piece of real estate, while the other is spiritual<sup>7</sup>: Tom cannot find a place in the paternal line of succession because in his eyes his father has failed the family. In this regard, Tom’s experience of a disrupted temporal order is played out again on yet a different level: just as he cannot come to terms with the memories of war, he cannot come to terms with his familial past. When he hears his grandmother speak of the Senator, he thinks: “There it was, her terrible projection of the past into the present, which was more a deliberate refusal to face change than a passive acquiescence to senility” (19). Yet unlike the military – or the corporation, in which he seeks refuge – the family in the novel is an association that enables its members to inhabit a continuity between past, present, and future by virtue of genealogy and inheritance. In contrast to the corporation, its members

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<sup>7</sup> I am using the term “spiritual” here as in the following quote by Pierre Bourdieu: “Family heirlooms not only bear material witness to the age and continuity of the lineage and so consecrate its social identity, which is inseparable from permanence over time; they also contribute in a practical way to its spiritual reproduction, that is, to transmitting the values, virtues and competences which are the basis of legitimate membership in bourgeois dynasties” (76-77).

are irreplaceable, as heritage and genealogy depend on the specific individual for the lineage to continue. In order to re-establish this continuity, Tom feels he must re-establish the family lineage, the genealogical manifestation of temporal continuity. The key to fulfilling this endeavor is his illegitimate son, the child he fathered during the war.

Tom learns of this son when he runs into his army comrade Cesar. Tom's former Italian mistress, Maria, raises their child by herself and can barely make a living. At first, Tom rejects the additional responsibility – raising one family is already more than he can handle. But when Maria eventually sends him a picture of his son, the child's family resemblance reminds Tom of his paternal duty. "With his queer old-fashioned clothes, and his slender big-eyed face, and with his shockingly familiar forehead and nose and mouth, he looked like one of the faded photographs Tom's grandmother had kept of 'The Senator' as a child" (257). No longer a "terrible projection of the past into the present," Tom recognizes his paternal heritage and lineage in the child. In his son, the past is incorporated in the present and will survive into the future. In the novel's final chapter, Tom arranges for a regular money transfer to Italy and looks into the legal preliminaries for an admission of paternity.

Yet Tom not only arranges for a regulated transmission of property in the future. He also finally accepts his family's spiritual inheritance and thus also secures his material prosperity by accepting his role in the local community in South Bay. It is at this point that the novel explicitly addresses the problem of private and public responsibility for the common good and the question of the possibility of arriving at its definition by rational-critical debate. After his grandmother's death, Tom and his wife decide to live in the old mansion until they sell the land on which it stands. Because such a sale needs the approval of the local authorities, Tom finds himself confronted with the local community, without whose consent he will not be able to sell. Strikingly, it is not this conflict over property rights that becomes the center of Tom's confrontation with the community. Instead, the community's argument is over a new public school, an argument in which Tom's personal life (as a parent) and the common good (the future development of the community) are entwined. The public debate that precedes the vote on the new public school is far removed from Habermas's ideal of rational-critical debate because it is characterized by rivaling private interests. At the same time, however, the debate as the process of decision-making stands in contrast to the

'mental health' speech discussed earlier in which it was Hopkins who defined "the public welfare" (29). Moreover, this discussion over a new public school and Tom's involvement stand in stark contrast to Hopkins's philanthropic activities. Whereas Hopkins's mental health project remained abstract and whereas he lost interest in as soon as it was launched, Tom's and his family's future are caught up in the future of the community in which they live, and thus in its well-being. Tom recognizes this interconnectedness between individual and community when he misses an important preliminary meeting because of his work for Hopkins:

That school thing is important, [Tom] thought – I should be helping to work for it. How interconnected everything is! If we could get the school, maybe we could get the housing project through and really make some money. Then maybe I could find and help Maria, and maybe I could work something out with Hopkins. Maybe I could find a good honest job with him which would pay me a decent living, but not require me to work day and night [...]. (240)

Following this realization that everything is connected, the novel winds down quickly. The new school is approved, and Hopkins offers Tom a job that will eventually enable him to work in South Bay. In the novel's final pages, the separate worlds in which Tom lived at the outset are finally connected. By acknowledging his illegitimate son and by accepting his family's heritage, Tom has been able to reintegrate the separate spheres of his life and has become a useful member of his community. At the same time the novel thus privileges an old model of property-ownership – Tom acquires landed property through inheritance – over modern corporations's capital flow. "In the Anglo-American eighteenth century, as J. G. A. Pocock has said, 'Property was the foundation of personality' and the base for civic virtue" (Leverenz 34). The novel thus ultimately rejects the possibility of corporate bodies (whether profit-oriented or non-profit) as benign agents in the public sphere, and counters the idea of stability and responsibility that corporate immortality and philanthropy project with a vision of domestic and patrimonial order. As David Leverenz has argued such a move suggests that corporate capitalism presented a threat rather than a boost to masculinity.

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