

The Businessman in American Popular Literature of the 1950s

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

Thomas Ward

Thesis Director

*Gene C. Goldman*  
(Advisor's Signature)

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

August 1990

August 18, 1990

Thomas Ward

Doctor Goldman

ID 499

13 August 1990

The Businessman in American Popular Literature of the 1950s

The decade of the 1950s was one of the most eventful periods of history in the United States. Seeking to preserve the military superiority of the United States, President Harry S. Truman would authorize the development of the hydrogen bomb-- a "superbomb" with the destructive power of five million tons of TNT-- only to see that new superiority destroyed nine months later when the Soviet Union developed its own hydrogen bomb (Oakley, 44-45). Joseph McCarthy would latch onto the communist paranoia of the time to gain national power and prestige before his fall in 1954 (181). The Korean War would result in the deaths of 33,629 Americans, the wounding of 103,000 and become the first major war the United States had fought in the 20th Century which did not end in victory (93). Julius and Ethel Rosenberg would be tried and convicted of treason for passing American atomic secrets to the Soviet Union and their execution in 1953 would spark protest in Europe (171). The U-2 spy plane runs over the Soviet Union begun in 1956 would lead to the Soviets' capture of Gary Powers in mid-1960 which would in turn cause another outbreak of the Cold War. The launching of Sputnik by the Soviets in 1957 would spawn the great space race of the late fifties and sixties and lead to the first manned moon landing in 1969.

Despite these and other important changes in American life during the 1950s, the general impression of the 1950s today is that "It was a happy, simple, placid time . . ." (Oakley, x). Similarly, it is generally supposed that "In the 1950s businessmen were held in greater esteem than they are today" (Darby, 336). While there may be a certain degree of truth in the preceding statement, even in the 1950s the American businessman did not enjoy the unqualified support of the public or the writers of the day. Three of the four authors discussed in this paper have been bestsellers: Sloan Wilson, Louis Auchincloss, and John Cheever. One of the works was a bestseller of the period--Sloan Wilson's The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit (1955)-- and two of them have made Darby's "notable American novels" list for the decade-- Venus in Sparta (1958) by Louis Auchincloss and Edna Ferber's Giant (1952)-- in Necessary American Fictions: Popular Literature of the 1950s (381-387). The success of these authors is a clear indication that the public shared views concerning the nature of business and businessmen with the authors. Given this is a reasonable assumption, the works discussed here can be seen as giving a fairly accurate portrayal of the businessman in popular literature of the 1950s.

None of the authors to be discussed in this paper have an absolute trust in the business world. Even Sloan Wilson, who is accused by Van Halsey of being a writer of "second-rate fiction" which is "still conforming to the myths of the and ideals of the business community" (397), writes of the sacrifices necessary for business success in

The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit. Louis Auchincloss writes of the hypocrisy, deceit, and amorality of the world of finance in Venus in Sparta despite having a career on Wall Street himself. Edna Ferber writes of the despotism of the cattle industry, but also of the ruthlessness of the entrepreneur who challenges it in Giant. Finally, John Cheever's The Enormous Radio and Other Stories (1953) portrays business and businessmen in an unfavorable light in three short stories.

There is a long history of unfavorable portrayals of businessmen in American novels. John Chamberlain, a businessman writing in a 1948 issue of Fortune magazine, bases the rationale for this on the lack of business experience by most authors, "Freudian quarrels with their fathers" and an unrealistic expectation of a socialist society that could only exist in their minds (148). Wayne Westbrook argues in Wall Street in the American Novel that these perhaps unjust portrayals are a result of the fundamental differences between the businessman and the writer. The businessman sees the world in practical, pragmatic terms, he suggests, while writers "eschew the eight-to-five life-style," and are "happiest seeking creative solitude" (1). Van Halsey of Amherst College suggests in a 1959 American Quarterly article that the reason for this poor view of business is because novels critical of the business world are written by outstanding authors critical of business while novels written in praise of business are generally "marginal novels" which cannot hope for more than "momentary success"

(392).

Disregarding the possible bias of the "outstanding author"-- which Howard Smith of the University of Georgia convincingly argues against in a 1959 Southern Economic Journal article. "The American Businessman in the American Novel"-- the general consensus is that the writer of "popular literature" is little more than a mouthpiece for the "myths of business." This is a simplistic view of both business and the popular writer. The writers discussed in this paper, despite their public success, do not wholeheartedly support business or the businessman. They do not have the distrust for business and finance that William Dean Howells reveals in The Rise of Silas Lapham (1885), or the outright hatred that Upton Sinclair reveals in works such as A Captain of Industry (1906) and The Brass Check (1920), but Wilson, Auchincloss, Ferber, and Cheever are aware of the darker side of business. They perceive the human costs to functioning in the business world of the 20th Century. They perceive the loss of freedom, integrity, and the simple pain which business can bring to the American family of the 1950s. None of them totally rejects business as such, but all portray a world much more complex than the simple corporate family man who commutes daily to work or the world of the rugged entrepreneur who is capable of success simply by "trying hard."

For the purposes of this paper, the term "business" will be used to define not only large organizations such as those found in The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit and Venus in Sparta, but also those entrepreneurial and agricultural

concerns described in Giant and The Enormous Radio and Other Stories. Each form of business described within this paper involves the livelihood of at least one of the major characters which involves the manufacturing, producing, or distribution of some good or service for the purpose of making a profit. Hence, these works can be grouped together in a broad category called business.

It must be conceded, however, that the authors under discussion were not the only ones to see the pitfalls of business in post-WWII America. Arthur Miller's play, Death of a Salesman (1949), tells the story of Willy Loman, a salesman who has worked his entire adult life for one company and is then fired when he ceases to be productive. Willy's futility, regrets, and broken life lead him to suicide even as his sons are unable to achieve the American Dream of being better off than their father. This theme of the broken American Dream is a concern that John Cheever will discuss in his short story, "The Pot of Gold." Death of a Salesman is a play, and as such lies outside the scope of this essay. However, it does share some of the concerns that Wilson, Cheever, and Auchincloss have about the cost of business to the individual and the family. This paper does not purport to suggest that the authors to be discussed were the only ones to point out the darker side of business in America during the era of the 1950s, but it points out that even some of the popular literature of the time did not unconditionally support business as Darby and Halsey seem to believe. No, even in popular literature such as The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit there was an awareness of the costs

business imposed on American families.

The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit is the story of Tom Rath, a World War II veteran and an educated white collar worker. Rath, whose family had once been wealthy, is now a mid-to-lower middle class employee of the Schanenhauser Foundation-- "an organization which an elderly millionaire had established to help finance scientific research and the arts (Wilson, 3). Because of the cost of supporting his family, he leaves the Foundation and goes to work for the United Broadcasting Corporation. Although Rath dislikes and is disliked by his immediate supervisor, Bill Ogden, he forms a good relationship with Ralph Hopkins, the president of UBC. Rath becomes a personal assistant to Hopkins, doing everything from writing his speeches to arranging Hopkins's hotel reservations as Hopkins prepares to form "a national committee on mental health" (25). As they work together, Hopkins becomes favorably impressed with Rath's honesty and offers him the opportunity to advance within the corporation, perhaps to someday become Hopkins's right hand man and eventual replacement. Despite the rapport they share and the honest admiration that Rath has for Hopkins, he turns down the promotion. The reasons for his refusal are part of the underlying theme of the novel: there are certain costs that must be paid for success in business.

These costs include the sacrifice of a personal life in order to create success in business. Ralph Hopkins, the successful businessman, is not a successful husband or father. The death of his son during World War II sends Hopkins's wife spiraling into an isolation from her husband

that makes their marriage a virtual sham. Hopkins's daughter, Susan, is a petulant young woman with no sense of appreciation for the financial success of her father. His devotion to the job-- Hopkins spends fifteen to twenty hours a day working for the company (27)-- has led him to the pinnacle of his profession, but it has also destroyed his family.

Tom Rath, on the other hand, who is admired by Hopkins for his honesty and integrity, refuses to make that sacrifice. In fact, Rath's life does not begin to turn around until he is able to sublimate his job to his other principles. His career does not take off until he refuses to become a yes-man to Hopkins and offers him honest criticism about the speech (209-210). His efforts at entrepreneurialism-- the death of his grandmother leaves him with real estate that could be used for a very profitable housing project-- seems doomed to failure until Rath decides to live his life honestly. Telling Hopkins about his intentions for advancement and informing his wife of the child he secretly fathered during the war seem to win for Rath not only his employer's respect, but also saves his marriage. Furthermore, as though to support his decision, Rath's right to his inheritance and the zoning change that would make the housing project possible are upheld, assuring Rath of success.

William Darby sees The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit as being "staunchly reverent toward those at the top" of the business world (336). Elizabeth Long, on the other hand, sees it as heralding a change in American fiction from the

entrepreneurial fixation of the "self-made man" to the development of a "'corporate-suburban' model in which the hero's saga is less one of conquest than one of integration of a set of disparate tasks and roles" (82). Ultimately, Darby feels that Wilson is attempting to praise business and the taking of responsibility (344) while Long believes he is formulating "a new definition of success" (89) for the modern worker of the 1950s. Both are correct, yet both also sell Wilson short.

Sloan Wilson does not create a diatribe against business in The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit, but he also does not simply sing its praises. Ralph Hopkins, who dedicates himself more to his business than his family, is an honorable man. There are few stains on his character-- his patronage of Tom Rath even after the latter has decided not to emulate him is a tribute to the essential benevolence of Hopkins's nature. Yet for all his good character, all his hard work, he is unable to hold his family together. The vast fortune that he has created through his work at UBC will be left to a woman with no idea of how to use it-- for herself, or for others. He has lost the opportunity to know his own son, for his obsession with work kept him away from home as the boy grew to manhood. His wife, whom he loves, is no longer a part of his life. All of his triumphs will vanish with his death because there is no one capable or willing to maintain his legacy.

Faced with this realization, it is difficult to believe that The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit is intended to praise businessmen such as Hopkins. Instead, Wilson seem to be

going out of his way to assert that one cannot succeed in business without making a sacrifice of the family and personal life. The wages of success are family ruin. Despite Hopkins's outburst that "Someone has to do the big jobs!" (262), Wilson is saying that the cost to the family is not worth it. He acknowledges the need for big businessmen like Hopkins as he acknowledges the need for large organizations like the UBC-- both of which are capable of doing things that the average person cannot for society-- but he does not advocate it as a way of life. Business is not evil to Wilson, but it can devour a person's life and become all-consuming. It has its place, but it should not become the overwhelming factor of a person's life. For Tom Rath and Sloan Wilson business is important, but the family is more so.

Tom Rath, therefore, does not succeed in the novel by simply integrating into the world of big business. He is not rewarded with the success he experiences in life for becoming a clone of Hopkins, but rather for breaking away from Hopkins's path. His refusal to make business his god and his decision to live life according to the dictates of his conscience ensure Rath's happiness in life. By placing business in its proper perspective-- beneath his integrity and family-- Tom Rath becomes more than just another man in a gray flannel suit. He becomes an example of how business and family should-- but not always do-- go together.

Louis Auchincloss's Venus in Sparta is similar to The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit in that the main character finds himself in an environment which attempts to mold him

to the desired standards of his class and occupation. Unlike Tom Rath, however, Michael Farish has no Ralph Hopkins to aid him by finding a position suited to Michael's gifts which would let him serve the company as well as his own personal needs. Unable to be fully happy in the life that he leads-- because it was not necessarily a life of his own choosing so much as one that he was expected to lead-- Michael unwittingly takes steps to destroy that life whenever it seems that he has achieved something that he desires. Because business, for Auchincloss, is amoral, there is no one or nothing willing to aid Michael, to help him survive what is a hostile environment of hypocrisy and deceit where Michael's own personal traits of honesty and morality can only lead to self-destruction.

At the beginning of Venus in Sparta, Michael Farish is a successful trust officer of the Hudson River Trust Company. His grandfather had been president, his father senior trust officer, and it is expected that Michael will follow in their footsteps to the presidency. Charles Meredith, the current head of Hudson River Trust Company, trusts him completely and has a great deal of affection for Michael. Michael also has the friendship and support of Ambrose Parr, the chairman and largest stockholder of the Hudson River Trust Company. Talented and intelligent as well as gifted with men like Parr and Meredith behind him, Michael should have been an unqualified success with a bright future ahead of him.

Yet for all his gifts and good fortune, Michael Farish does not have a happy life. His reputation at Hudson River

Trust Company is built on the fact that he acquired a very profitable account, the Winters account, when he was just starting his career. Unknown to anyone but himself, however, Mr. Winters had wished to set up a provision in the will that states Hudson River Trust could only receive profit of one and a half percent from its dealings with the Winters estate. Winters died before this request could be put into the contract, and the language in his will is vague enough that Hudson River Trust is able to make profit over and above the one and a half percent limit. A letter exists which verifies Winters's original request, but Michael is the only one who has read it. Michael does not destroy the letter out of a subconscious desire to be caught-- but he consciously tells himself that he is preserving the letter as a means of playing a "game" with the departed Mr. Winters (40). Only at a chronologically later time, when he is confronted by Danny Jones, an assistant trust officer, does he admit to himself that he thought of the letter as being like "the poison capsules that spies wore around their necks in case of capture in enemy lands" (31). The letter is simply one example of the steps that Michael subconsciously takes to destroy his career.

For example, Michael antagonizes Danny Jones after the latter discovers the letter until the younger man quits and goes to the Winters estate with the letter. Knowing as Michael did that Danny Jones was having an affair with Flora, Michael's wife, he knows that Jones is anxious enough to attempt to discredit Michael before the latter can do the same to him. Even then, Michael does not destroy the

letter; it is his ticket to freedom from a world and way of life he never chose. When Jones brings the letter to Mrs. Winters's attention, Michael resigns from the firm even though he feels the firm was within its legal rights to charge the extra fees. Divorcing his wife, Michael enters into a relationship with an old lover, Alida Parr, the daughter of Charles Meredith and the daughter-in-law of Ambrose Parr. Cleared by the Surrogate Court of any wrongdoing in the Winters affair, Michael is able to return to the Hudson River Trust Company as though nothing had ever happened. Even Ambrose Parr does not begrudge him for breaking up the marriage of his son, Jimmie Parr, and continues to support Michael. Yet Michael's self-destructive instincts come to the fore and he finds no happiness in his work or his new marriage. Insanely, for he has not found contentment or happiness in his new life, he throws his marriage to Alida away and winds up pursuing his ex-stepdaughter, Ginny Dexter. After achieving even that goal, Michael decides to completely succumb to his instinct for self-annihilation and drowns himself in the ocean.

Though his suicidal impulses spring from areas other than just his business career, it is apparent that Michael pays a price for the deceit that leads to his initial success. His life is almost totally planned out for him from childhood, and his pre-occupation with work makes it almost impossible for him to discover his wife has been having an affair with Danny Jones. His son, his only child, Seymour, is an "unlovable" child who is involved in a racist incident at Averhill, Michael's alma mater. His

stepdaughter-- it is unclear if Michael helped raise her or not-- is unable to hold a job and has an unsavory personal reputation similar to her mother's.

Still, business does play a part in Michael's downfall. As Christopher Dahl puts it, "Venus in Sparta is a compelling portrait of an insider in business and society who simply does not fit" (111). Michael is unable to live up to the demands that his life places upon him. From the very beginning, his life is planned out for him. Since his father and grandfather worked for Hudson River Trust Company, it is expected of Michael that he join the firm as well. Never given the opportunity to discover what he wishes to do in life, Michael is placed into a position for which he is unsuited. Hence, he takes steps to destroy the life that others have chosen for him whenever it becomes likely that he will be given the conventional attributes of the successful businessman. Because Michael is personally unsuited for the roles that business and society expect of him, he has no choice but to destroy himself.

It would be a mistake to classify Louis Auchincloss as being against business or finance. He himself has worked in finance and on Wall Street as a lawyer whose firm specialized in estates and tax law (Kane, 36). Auchincloss does not have a political ax to grind regarding the system. He makes no suggestions on ways to improve it. He is a part of the business world, and knows it well.

Still Auchincloss is aware of the hypocrisy of the system. Michael is not criticized for the fact that he committed the impropriety of not disclosing the letter, but

rather for the fact that he permitted the letter to exist-- and antagonized Danny Jones into exposing the information to Mrs. Winters. Charlie Meredith is not upset over a moral lapse by Michael, but rather by the fact that the letter may enable Mrs. Winters to recover a large sum of money from the bank (178-179). Hypocritically, after blaming Michael for the whole Winters situation, the company offers Michael his position back as though nothing had ever happened when the Surrogate Court clears Michael and the Hudson River Trust Company innocent of any wrongdoing.

Auchincloss does not praise the company that Michael works for, nor does he condemn it. He does not condemn Michael's employers. As Kane points out in a 1965 Critique: Studies in American Fiction article, Auchincloss does not see finance as being evil, but rather amoral. Auchincloss's financial figures do not concern themselves with an "abstraction called law or justice, but to their firms, their own careers, and their clients" (Kane, 36). By performing certain tasks that would otherwise have to be done by outside agencies because of the profit restriction that the letter would place upon Hudson River Trust Company, not only does the company benefit, but so too does Mrs. Winters. Michael, however, does have a certain sense of justice that is evident when he suggests to the schoolmaster at Averhill that his own son, Seymour, be expelled for the cruelty he displayed toward a black student (70). The capacity for morality that Michael has, coupled with his ambivalence about his position in life, encourages him to retain the letter when it would have been more prudent-- not

only for himself, but also the firm-- if he destroyed it. Michael, unable to live in the amoral world of business because of his conflicting desires for morality and business success, is also unable to leave it. There is nothing inherently evil about the Hudson River Trust Company or the business of finance in Venus in Sparta; it is beyond simple moral constructs. However, there is a definite element of hypocrisy in business for Auchincloss, and he is not afraid to show this unseemly side to the American public of the 1950s.

Giant, by Edna Ferber, is a huge novel that details the events in the life of Leslie Lynnton Benedict and her family. The "giant" of the title could be Texas itself, the scene of most of the action; Bick Benedict, the head of Reata Ranch; or Jett Rink, the cattle hand turned oil-entrepreneur who eventually comes to dominate the landscape of Texas. In any case, Ferber's novel details the destruction of one type of business supremacy-- the cattle barons who virtually rule Texas at the chronological start of the novel-- to the development of oil wealth in Texas which, because of men like Jett Rink, "shatters the despotic ranch-based power structure" and leads to "fair elections, unions, and increased social justice for Mexican-Americans" (Long, 67).

Ferber's novel presents the idea of social progress coming about as a result of business changes. In that sense, Jett Rink can be seen as being almost a hero. Yet even if there are positive results (such as increased personal freedom for the Mexican Americans) from Rink's

business endeavors, the man himself is presented as not being especially heroic or open minded in his actual life. Ferber approves of the break up of the power of the cattle barons-- her protagonist, Leslie, comments on the injustices that it fosters from time to time throughout the novel-- but it seems as though she is saying that the type of man who can bring about these sort of changes in the world is little more than a brute, a cunning if untrustworthy man.

Leslie Lynnton comes to Texas from Virginia, having married Jordan "Bick" Benedict. She is an independent, intelligent young woman who "argued with her distinguished father and friends on matters political, sociological, medical and literary just as if she were a man" (Ferber, 66). Bick Benedict came to the Lynnton home in order to purchase Leslie's horse, My Mistake. Despite the differences between them-- Leslie's family is decidedly liberal, with her father even being on virtual first name terms with the black chauffeur, while Bick Benedict is part of the Texas "aristocracy"-- they eventually fall in love and marry.

Despite her love for Bick, Leslie notes and disapproves of the virtual feudal system that has been set up by the cattle barons. Luz, Bick's sister, calls the Mexicans who work for the Benedicts lazy people who would "be squatting on their honkers all day if I didn't keep after them" (152). The school that has been set up for the children has been arranged on color lines so that "the lighter ones seemed to occupy the front rows, the darker the back" (156). The "hovels" that have been set up for the families of the

workers are "flimsier, even, than the Negro cabins she had seen so familiarly in Virginia" (157). There are holes in the walls, and a sick young mother does not have the money to purchase formula to spare her child her own sickness. The cattle barons even control the votes of the Mexicans who work for them (309). In short, the cattle barons function as the virtual masters of the Mexicans.

Thus, the system that Ferber describes deserves to be destroyed. None of the cattlemen are shown to be evil men intentionally, but they are blinded by their upbringing to the cruelty and prejudice they demonstrate against the Mexicans. Such a corrupt system must be taken down, destroyed. The person who sets in motion the forces that will result in this eventual destruction of the cattle baron system is Jett Rink, the entrepreneur.

According to Elizabeth Long, Jett Rink, "nasty and unscrupulous," still "contributes to social betterment by exercising his entrepreneurial drive" (67). He functions as the agent of change. Of course, his reasons for doing so have nothing to do with a desire to improve society, but rather come about as a side effect of his success. Ferber implies that businessmen can change society for the better, but are not particularly out to do so; Jett Rink is not an altruist out to save the Mexican worker-- he has all the prejudices of the cattle barons-- but the modern world he ushers in, it is implied, will lead to a better way of life for the Mexicans.

In his first chronological appearance, Jett Rink is a hired hand at the Reata Ranch. He is a "cheeky lout" that

even Bick describes as "a kind of genius" (193). He is a master of machines and mechanics, but also "naturally mean" to animals. He even goads Luz Benedict into riding My Mistake in hoop skirts, thus contributing to her death (254). Despite his cruelty, he is still successful with women-- not only the Mexican girls "are hot for him" (194), but also Cora Dart, a schoolteacher at Reata. Prophetically, Bick asserts "he'll probably end up a billionaire-- or in the electric chair" (194). Jett himself has no doubt of his abilities either: "I'm going to be a millionaire and I ain't kidding. I'm going to have a million dollars. I'm going to have a billion. I'm going to have a zillion" (216).

Jett Rink does indeed become wealthy. The small piece of land that Bick had awarded him when Rink's father disappeared-- the unspoken message being that he was killed for breaking the rules of Reata Ranch-- turns out to be laden with oil. At the moment of his initial success, Rink comes to Reata and tells Bick that he will someday purchase the rights to the oil under Reata: "I'm going to pay you a million dollars or five million or ten and you'll take it because you'll need the money. I'm going to have more money than you ever saw-- you and the rest of the stinkin' sons of bitches of Benedicts" (365). True to his word, he does eventually lease the rights to Reata (403). Furthermore, Rink is "always trying to do something bigger or costs more money than anybody else" (43). He builds a new airport, a grand motel, and spreads his power and influence throughout Texas. He uses "his wealth to compel social acceptance . . ." (Long, 75). Almost singlehandedly, he breaks the power

of the cattle barons and begins a process that will supposedly bring democracy and liberty to the Texas underclass.

Ferber, though she uses a character who is less than honorable, clearly favors the entrepreneurial spirit of business. Her protagonist and the younger generation all feel that the giant ranches of Texas are outdated. As Bob Dietz, the only member of the younger generation capable and talented enough to run Reata explains, "success or failure, a man who is running his own ranch is a man" (297). The Reata Ranch turns men into "pieces of machinery" and "no man in a democracy should have the right to own millions of acres of land" (297). Ferber clearly favors individualism over the oligarchy of cattle barons that control Texas, entrepreneurialism over the spirit-crushing, people-dominating great ranches. No good, it is argued, can come from such a system.

Yet while Ferber gives consent and approval to the free enterprise system, the type of man who makes a success of it is not honorable or trustworthy or decent. Jett Rink is a hard, cruel man with few redeeming personal traits. Still, the system he helps create will provide fewer opportunities for the kind of domination that the cattle barons enjoyed, so he benefits society. It as though Ferber is describing a kind of social Darwinism where the fittest person for entrepreneurialism is not "good" or even a "gentleman." On that basis, Ferber seems to approve of the free enterprise system and believe that it is an effective force for social change-- yet also state that people who function in the

business world cannot be trusted or kind.

John Cheever's The Enormous Radio and Other Stories is the most cynical work described in this paper concerning business. Cheever himself never had a major occupation besides writing as he published his first story at the age of eighteen and was able to support himself mainly through his writing (Hinckley, 129), so he does not have first hand experience of the business world. Perhaps because of this, the stories that discuss business in The Enormous Radio and Other Stories tend to focus on the failures of people in business as well as a lower class of people than the ones typically described in the previous works discussed in this paper. Three of the stories in The Enormous Radio and Other Stories touch upon the effect of business and businessmen on people's lives: "The Pot of Gold," "The Children," and "The Summer Farmer."

Lynne Waldeland describes "The Pot of Gold" as being the story of "innocents in pursuit of wealth and success in the business world whose quest is doomed to repeated failure because of their incredibly bad luck and a degree of naivete" (33). John Cheever begins "The Pot of Gold" by describing his protagonists, Ralph and Laura Whittemore, as not being "incorrigible treasure hunters" but still susceptible to "the peculiar force of money" and that ". . . the promise of it had untoward influence on their lives" (28). Cheever describes them as being stolidly lower middle class, from the Midwest, always "standing on the threshold of plenty . . ." (29). In short, they are intelligent, good people who deserve to be successful.

Such success is not forthcoming, however. Ralph is offered a job at another firm similar to his current position but would a greater salary and opportunities for advancement, but the new owners of that firm never follow up on their offer. They refuse to speak to Ralph until one of them finally admits they had hired a man who seemed better suited for the position. Rather colder, they tell him "we've got other things to do besides answer the telephone" (31).

This callous betrayal by the business world is not the last time that Ralph will be disappointed. After failing to make his way up through the corporate ladder, Ralph develops a new Venetian blind that will provide silence for people attempting to get a good night's rest. In another work of the time, Ralph's efforts at entrepreneurship might have rewarded him with wealth, power, and prestige. In "The Pot of Gold," however, the Whittemores simply exhaust more of their money and fail yet again. Finally, Ralph is offered a job by a millionaire, Paul Hadaam, whose life was saved by Ralph's Uncle George. Yet even this last chance is lost when Hadaam suffers a stroke and his business does not keep the promise he made to Ralph.

Time and again, Ralph and Laura reach for the brass ring, the pot of gold, and time and again fate conspires to betray them. Elizabeth Long classifies the era from 1945-55 as being a time when novels were concerned with success (63). "The Pot of Gold" not only seems to deride the idea that one can become a success simply by having a good idea, becoming an entrepreneur, but also the idea of the corporate

man whose "saga is less one of conquest than of integration of a set of disparate tasks and roles" (Long, 82). The business world, Cheever suggests, is impossible for some people to enter. Businessmen do not care for people to whom they make promises, and lack the simple decency to inform them of the new decisions they, the businessmen, have made. For most people, Cheever points out, there is no pot of gold at the end of the business rainbow-- only continuing disappointment and betrayal. For Cheever, happiness is found not in business, but in love.

"The Children" continues this theme of betrayal by a businessman. Victor and Theresa Mackenzie care for Mr. Hatherly as though he were their father, even go so far as to name their daughter after "Mr. Hatherly's sainted mother" (75), and in general function as his surrogate children. When he dies, however, Hatherly leaves them nothing in his will, and Victor is turned out of the business by the son whose finances he had helped put in order. The story continues with the Mackenzies functioning as live-in guests and caretakers for various people, but the message is that they would never have become the way they are if not for Mr. Hatherly. He taught them to survive by pleasing others, yet left them nothing. Hence, they are unable to function in the world as anything other than "children" for other people. In short, Hatherly warped them until they lost the ability to live except through serving others. Because of this selfish businessman, the Mackenzies are doomed to spend their lives acting as "pets" for other people.

"The Summer Farmer" is a different slant on the

businessman. Paul Hollis is a man who lives and works in the city during the week and commutes to the small family farm that he owns during the weekends. The farm represents his escape from the pressures of the business world. Upon reaching it, Paul experiences a revitalization that normally lasts until the fall: "his business suit bound at the shoulders when he left the car, as if he had taken on height, for the place told him that he was ten years younger; the maples, the house, the simple mountains all told him this" (140). It is difficult to say to what extent that Paul Hollis's life in business affects him, but it is plain that he prefers the country life to his job and life in the city. Yet in "The Summer Farmer," Paul learns that business can continue to affect him.

For the first time, Paul finds that he must hire an extra hand to work his farm. The man he employs to help is his neighbor, Kasiak. Kasiak is a Russian who left his native country but still harbors communist beliefs. Throughout their relationship, Kasiak continually leaves clippings from communist papers that condemn the capitalistic system that is part of Paul's life. Though he prides himself on his tolerance for the beliefs of others, Paul cannot help growing angry over this criticism of his system (146). When the rabbits he bought as pets for his children die of poison, Paul wrongly accuses Kasiak of killing them. Discovering that he was wrong, Paul returns to work in the city with "signs of mortality . . . signs of obsolescence . . . so visibly shaken by some recent loss of principle that it would have been noticed by a stranger

across the aisle" (151).

The implication is that life in business, in the city, has made Paul unfit for the honest life of the country. He has learned to distrust and hate those who are different from himself. In short, business has made him lose the principle of tolerance of others.

Obviously, Cheever has the most to say about business in "The Pot of Gold." At one point, when it seems that the Whittemores will finally break the circle of poverty that has held them for so long, Alice Holinshed, a friend of Laura's, expresses the desperation for success and money that so afflicts the members of the lower middle class: "I swear to Jesus I'd murder somebody if I thought it would bring us in any money" (44).

Cheever sees the injustices of the business world. He sees the desperation, the broken promises, the lost dreams. He sees the way modern life has changed some men, making them intolerant in spite of themselves. Yet for all his disapproval, he does not offer a better economic system. Kasiak, the communist in "The Summer Farmer," is as bigoted and intolerant in his own way as Paul Hollis. Cheever himself, though on good terms with the Communist Party at one time, disagreed with them over prayer (Donaldson, ix), so he does not see communism as being a better way of life either. Thus, Cheever does not state that all the wrongs in human society are a result of the capitalist business system, but he does portray the injustices of that system when he sees them.

These writers of the 1950s did not see business as being

a kind of panacea for the ills of mankind. Sloan Wilson was able to see that business success and family happiness can often be incompatible. Louis Auchincloss shows that the upward career path and expectations of others could result in a trap for the person unable to live up to those demands. Ironically, Edna Ferber, who had the most positive statements about capitalism in her contention that Jett Rink's entrepreneurialism would right the wrongs done to the downtrodden of Texas, was one of the authors that Joseph McCarthy claimed was a "communist author" and that her books should have been removed from the shelves of the International Information Agency (Oakley, 175). Even John Cheever, with his pointed observations about the businessman and business world, did not advocate the overthrowing of democracy that McCarthy and HUAC feared.

The 1950s was not a simple era. It was a time of complex issues, people, and situations. The authors discussed in this paper did not have simplistic, black and white views about business. Most of them present the positive side of business as well as the negative. With the exception of John Cheever, they discuss the benefits of the business world as well as the liabilities. Sloan Wilson does not doubt the importance of business or businessmen like Ralph Hopkins. Louis Auchincloss does not portray the world of finance as being evil, but rather amoral; a place that contributes to the destruction of Michael Farish not because it is evil, but because he does not match its demands. Edna Ferber believes that social progress for the underclass in Texas can only come when the cattle barons

lose their grip on Texas. Cheever's world is admittedly darker, but he offers nothing better.

The writers of the 1950s saw the promises as well as the threats of business. Sloan Wilson saw the cost to the family and personal life that business can exact, but he also saw the benefits that a company such as the United Broadcasting Corporation could create. Louis Auchincloss saw the effect the world of high finance could have on a person who was unsuited to the task, but he also saw the necessity of someone managing the financial affairs of others. Edna Ferber saw business as a spur to social change, but she also saw the entrepreneur as being a dangerous sort of man. John Cheever saw the broken promise of the American dream, but he saw nothing that could replace it. In short, these writers of the 1950s were not able wholeheartedly to endorse the business world, but they did not entirely condemn it either. It was a part of the American way of life, and they chose to write about it and portray both the dark and bright sides of business and the businessman to America in the 1950s.

## Works Cited

- Auchincloss, Louis. Venus in Sparta. 1958. New York: Avon, 1971.
- Chamberlain, John. "The Businessman in Fiction." Fortune. Nov. 1948: 134-48.
- Cheever, John. The Enormous Radio and Other Stories. U.S.A.: Funk & Wagnalls Company, Inc., 1953.
- Dahl, Christopher C. Louis Auchincloss. New York: Ungar Publishing Company, 1986.
- Darby, William. Necessary American Fictions: Popular Literature of the 1950s. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 1987.
- Donaldson, Scott. Introduction. Conversations with John Cheever. Ed. Scott Donaldson. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987. vii-xi.
- Ferber, Edna. Giant. Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1952.
- Halsey, Van R. "Fiction and the Businessman: Society Through All Its Literature." American Quarterly. II (1959): 391-402.
- Hinckley, Karen, and Barbara Hinckley. American Best Sellers: A Reader's Guide to Popular Fiction. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Kane, Patricia. "Lawyers at the Top: the Fiction of Louis Auchincloss." Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction. VII (1965): 36-46.
- Long, Elizabeth. The American Dream and the Popular Novel. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985.
- Miller, Arthur. Death of a Salesman. 1949. Plays of

Our Time. Ed. Bennett Cerf. New York: Random House,  
1967. 237-329.

Oakley, Ronald J. God's Country: America in the Fifties.  
New York: Red Dembner Enterprises, Corp., 1986.

Smith, Howard R. "The American Businessman in the American  
Novel." Southern Economics Journal. 25.3 (1959):  
265-302.

Waldeland, Lynne. "The Enormous Radio: Cheever's Short-  
Story Craft." John Cheever. Ed. Warren French. Twayne's  
United States Authors Series. Boston: Twayne, 1979.

Westbrook, Wayne W. Wall Street in the American Novel. New  
York: New York University Press, 1980.

Wilson, Sloan. The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit. 1955. New  
York: Pocket Cardinal Books, Inc., 1964.