Christopher Lockett

Domesticity as Redemption in *The Puppet Masters*: Robert A. Heinlein's Model for Consensus

The epilogue of Robert A. Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters* (1951) describes a mission of vengeance being launched against a race of parasitic aliens who very nearly conquered the Earth. The description provides a certain thematic microcosm for the novel, in which the domesticity of family is offset by the looming violence of a military campaign. The narrator, Sam Cavanaugh, recounts a gruffly sentimental farewell with his father and then comments on the fact that his wife will also be part of the mission because "most of us are married couples and the single men are balanced by single women" (339). In the twelve years it will take to arrive at the enemies' planet, he further adds, "we'll have time for two or three kids too" (339).

Considering the novel's final epithet—"*Death and Destruction!*" (340; emphasis in original)—the desire to have children on the way to a military campaign seems somewhat perverse. The major metaphorical gesture of Heinlein's novel, however, is to conflate domesticity with a certain set of stereotypically masculine qualities. Given that the novel makes a point throughout of collapsing the dual tropes of familial integrity and national/military integrity into the same rhetorical space, the final juxtaposition of domesticity and warfare summarizes the narrative's defining gesture—that the former trope is the ultimate means of obtaining the latter.

It is in this respect that the speculative narrative of *The Puppet Masters* attempts to bridge the disparate ends of one of the Cold War era's crucial cultural paradoxes: the celebration of American individualism against communist collectivism, which found its obverse in the increasing pressure toward social conformity, consensus, and domesticity in American middle-class life. Heinlein's appropriation of certain elements of the hard-boiled and noir genres popular at the time, particularly in the creation of the tough-as-nails hero Sam and the femme fatale Mary, ironically makes use of noir's oppositional figurations of masculinity in the service of justifying the culture of consensus.[1] The putative "crisis of masculinity" emerging from the broad trend of men allowing themselves to be domesticated—marrying, accepting tedious jobs at large companies in return for steady paychecks, and moving into bland homes in newly built subdivisions in the various burgeoning suburbias around the country—is inverted by Heinlein's rewriting of the "crisis" as, instead, a necessary movement from innocence to experience.[2] Sam Cavanaugh's trajectory of growth to true manhood, in other words, is from strong and capable but isolated individual to that 1950s archetype of the social creature: the family man.

At first glance, it may seem odd to portray the author of *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) as a paragon of Eisenhower-era family values, so I should

clarify at the outset that that is not precisely what this essay argues. Heinlein's libertarianism and antipathy towards communism are well-known, indeed notorious. There is nothing in *The Puppet Masters*, for example, suggesting the gilded sanctities of 1950s suburbia that begin to be nostalgized not even twenty years later; Sam is notably non-religious to the point of cheerful irreverence, and his marriage is a perfunctory bureaucratic procedure at a government office that offers "contracts" in five-year, ten-year, or "lifetime" installments. If anything, what the novel would seem to allegorize is an ethic of personal responsibility later outlined in more explicit detail in *Starship Troopers* (1959), in which citizenship is only bestowed upon those who step up to perform civic or military duty.[3]

1. *The Puppet Masters* is an interesting amalgam of generic elements, combining the prevalent sf trope of alien invasion with a secret-agent espionage narrative that anticipates Ian Fleming's James Bond, as well as, most importantly for this essay, many of the trappings of hard-boiled detective fiction and film noir. Our first view of Sam Cavanaugh[4] has him waking up beside a nameless blonde and answering an emergency call from the "office." The sequence unfolds in almost stereotypically hard-boiled fashion, albeit with the inclusion of sf elements:

> I went into the bath, injected a quarter grain of "Gyro" into my arm, then let the vibro shake me apart for three minutes while the drug put me back together. I stepped out a new man, or at least a good mock-up of one, and got my jacket. The blonde was snoring gently.
>
> I let my subconscious race back along its track and realized with regret that I did not owe her a durned thing, so I left her. There was nothing in the apartment to give me away, nor even to tell her who I was. (2) [5]

Cavanaugh is explicitly presented as cold, curt, clinical, and disconnected; his shot in the arm could as well have been a shot of bourbon à la Philip Marlowe, and his treatment of the nameless blonde emphasizes his self-imposed solitude, wishing as he obviously does that his sexual encounter could be rendered as a perfunctory economic transaction.

While the narrative frames Sam's exploits within the rubric of espionage, his character's language, attitudes, and sensibilities are explicitly reflective of such hard-boiled detectives as Marlowe, Mike Hammer, and Sam Spade. Though he is an operative of an intelligence agency and under the command of a superior—the "Old Man"—he embodies the same cool, aloof, tough-as-nails temperament as those film-noir icons mentioned above. The partner with whom he is paired up, "Mary," is, similarly, as stereotypical a femme fatale as could be contrived: Sam describes her as an imposing beauty but with enough masculine characteristics to be a force to be reckoned with—a "long, lean body" (4), a face "handsome rather than beautiful," teeth "sharp and clean" (5), all topped with a flaming mane of red hair. As we discover later on, she has a fondness for weapons and a great ability to use them, and is generally a very dangerous fighter; perhaps most impressive to Sam, she has "that quality, rare in babes and commendable, of not talking when she had nothing to say" (7). Mary possesses, in other words, the necessary qualities of the twinned roles of

femme fatale and hard-boiled heroine: beauty, physical and sexual dangerousness, presence, and the ability to serve as a match for the hero on all levels.

She is also intuitive: when the aliens start possessing people, she is the first to discern that something is amiss by their utter lack of response to her sexual signals. After first investigating the putative crash site and speaking with some of the locals, Mary asks Sam and the Old Man:

> "[D]id you notice the way they treated me?"
> "Who?" I said sharply.
> "Both the state sergeant and the two boys. When I use the sweet-little-bundle-of-sex routine, something should happen. Nothing did."
> "They were all attentive," I objected.
> "You can't understand—but I *know*. I always know. Something was wrong with them. They were dead inside. Harem guards, if you know what I mean." (14)

The first encounter with the possessed humans begins to establish the Manichaean rhetoric of the Cold War—i.e., the essentialist opposition between American and communist subjectivity. The descriptor "dead inside" introduces on one hand the quality of soullessness Sam will caustically attribute to the "commissars" behind the Iron Curtain with casual frequency. On the other hand, the lack of a "normal" response on the part of the possessed humans to Mary's "sweet-little-bundle-of-sex routine" also introduces the theme of sexual ambivalence that underwrote much anti-communist rhetoric. As Chris West has argued, *The Puppet Masters* exhibits on a quasi-subliminal level an "obsess[ion] with the perceived dangers of male homosexuality," and as a novel it is "symptomatic of widespread social and cultural anxieties regarding homosexuality extant in the United States throughout the 1950s" (17).

While agreeing in principle with West's argument, to say that Heinlein's novel is "obsessed" with the perceived dangers of homosexuality is rather overstating the case. His second statement, that the novel is "symptomatic," is closer to the mark: this novel, I want to suggest, very specifically replicates the mores, in David Savran's words, of an era, "when the architects and administrators of the Cold War turned their attention to policing the American body politic, they aimed precisely at communists and homosexuals in the conviction that both groups were plotting to undermine and destroy the American way of life" (4). The gender politics at play in *The Puppet Masters* evince an awareness of the discursive nuances of the day, in terms of the normative dictates of domesticity and consensus, the quasi-allegorical elements of popular sf, and the counter-narratives offered in hard-boiled fiction and film noir. The early episode in which the alien presence is intuited by Mary via her heteronormative antennae establishes metaphorical scaffolding for a narrative whose figurations of the Other never venture so far (*pace* Chris West) as to overtly suggest homosexuality, but rather vaguely gesture toward a sexual ambivalence on the part of the possessed humans that is sterile and soulless and hence antithetical to the virile and instinctive heterosexuality of our protagonists.

The flaw for Sam in this equation, however, which he does not appreciate at the outset, is that his isolated heterosexuality is comparably sterile, metaphori-

cally if not literally so. His initial response to Mary is typical of his general relationship to women—he responds on a libidinal level to all attractive women he meets (upon first seeing Mary, he "wanted to drop one wing and run in circles" [5]), and if his attitude to the blonde in his bed at the outset is any indication, he is not one for long-term commitments. With Mary, however, he instinctively adopts a different attitude in the aftermath of their initial mission and begins a sustained pursuit of her that lasts throughout the novel and predictably ends in marriage. In fact, he effectively proposes marriage after only knowing her a couple of days, but is firmly and politely rebuffed. While his eagerness to wed seems glaringly out of character, it is nevertheless in step with the noir convention of "matching" the protagonist with an appropriate partner—that is to say, the hard-boiled hero has high standards for his potential mates and is indifferent to women who do not meet his own singular qualities of intelligence, competence, and intuition.[6] Sam's pursuit of Mary is based in his instinctive recognition of her talents and abilities; Mary's initial refusals, however, have less to do with any lack of reciprocation on her part than with Sam's need to mature from his isolated heterosexuality and become socialized into the heteronormativity of community, family, and responsibility.

Heinlein's novel belongs to a pervasive subgenre of films and fiction of the postwar period in which the concomitant paranoia of communist infiltration and nuclear war surface in figurations of alien invasion. Though it is easy to read most (if not all) alien invasion narratives from the period simply as allegories of the Soviet ideological and nuclear threat, to do so is somewhat reductive: as has been suggested elsewhere, the gesture equating invading aliens with Soviet forces ignores more nuanced anxieties pervading the Cold War era that had as much to do with domestic mores as with the spectre of incursion and infiltration.[7] In other words, the fears of communist collectivism were balanced at least in part by the suspicion that erosion of individualism was also at work in the culture of consensus. Heinlein's novel constitutes an interesting resolution of this tension.

The Puppet Masters takes place in a not-so-distant future (2007), in which a hyper-secret agency deep within American intelligence, known only as "the Section," provides the first line of defense in the espionage war. Russian and Chinese communism is still the principal enemy the Section faces, at least until they detect the crash of an alien spacecraft in Iowa. The new enemy is a race of parasitic aliens that attach themselves to human hosts, controlling their thoughts and actions and rendering those afflicted—or "hag-ridden," as our narrator terms it—mere automatons enslaved to a collective consciousness.

Published as it was in 1951, the allusions to communism in the depiction of the alien enemy are overt and glaring, something not lost on Sam Cavanaugh, our hard-boiled secret-agent narrator. Indeed, Sam does not miss an opportunity to draw comparisons between his human and alien enemies, suggesting that "hag-ridden" Soviets might not actually notice any fundamental difference:

> I wondered why the [aliens] had not attacked Russia first; Stalinism seemed tailormade [sic] for them. On second thought, I wondered if they had. On third thought, I wondered what difference it would make; the people behind the curtain

> had had their minds enslaved and parasites riding them for generations. There might not be two kopeks difference between a commissar with a slug and a commissar without a slug. (205)

Interesting here is the close encounter (so to speak) of an allegory with its object: communists and their alien equivalents are literally conflated, as we do in fact later discover that the Soviet Union *had* been invaded first. Heinlein here signals his narrative strategy in such a way as to make it didactic: the familiar allegory of the collectivized invaders so common to tales of conspiracy and paranoia in the 1950s collapses upon itself and renders the association of the collectivized "slugs" and their collective identity with communism unequivocal. In short, the narrative is at pains to let us know quite explicitly what (and who) the enemy is, and the lack of "two kopeks of difference between a commissar with a slug and a commissar without a slug" establishes a clear contiguity between the aliens and communism, leaving no room for a more ambivalent or nuanced interpretation of the allegory.

2. To understand the significance of this lack of ambivalence, it is crucial to grasp the degree to which the perceived pressure toward social conformity and consensus during the early years of the Cold War was itself a source of anxiety and paranoia. Indeed, a great many popular expressions of paranoia in the 1950s, from B-movies to popular novels, concerned themselves as much with this pressure as with the specter of communist infiltration. Considering the irony that both anxieties proceeded from unease about threats to individuation, it is perhaps unsurprising that numerous texts of the period can be read from both perspectives. Don Siegel's epitome of B-movie anti-communist paranoia, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), was based on a three-part serial written by author Jack Finney for *Colliers* magazine, published as *The Body Snatchers* in 1955. Finney's novel, while certainly containing significant allusions to communism in its depictions of the soulless "pod people," is simultaneously a critique of the Eisenhower-era suburban culture of consensus and conformity; while dismissing political readings of the novel by declaring it "mere entertainment," Finney did allow that his story derived at least in part from the evolution of the suburban US.[8]

This uneasy coexistence of critiques of both communist and suburban American collectivism articulates the paradox underwriting the culture of the Cold War consensus as cited in my introduction—this was a period, as Alan Nadel has suggested, marked by "the general acceptance ... of a relatively small set of narratives by a relatively large portion of the population" (4). As has been variously catalogued and studied by such scholars as Nadel, Robert J. Corber, David Savran, Elaine Tyler May, and Stephen J. Whitfield (among others), "consensus" is an umbrella term referring variously to the politics of containment, the cult of domesticity, the McCarthyite ethos of political conformity, and (as mentioned above) the explosion of middle-class suburban populations and the concomitant increase in consumerism.

As May observes, these last two elements were intrinsically linked. The growth of suburbia, facilitated in part by the sharp increase in middle-class,

white-collar jobs, gave rise to a new form of conspicuous consumption, based not in luxury and decadence but in the twinned cults of domesticity and efficiency. Citing the Kelly Longitudinal Study, an extensive survey of white middle-class families during the 1950s, May notes that the kind of consumerism preoccupying the female respondents was "geared toward home, family leisure, education and recreation," rather than "diamonds, mink coats, or other personal luxuries" (180). Similarly, men's attitudes in the study tended to reformulate traditional conceptions of masculinity along the axis of breadwinner, family man, and father as fatherhood "became a new badge of masculinity and meaning for the postwar man" (146). Fathers were further charged with the serious task of taking a hand in the raising of their sons so as to preclude the possibility of excessive mothering turning out a generation of "sissies."

Fatherhood's "badge of masculinity" was thus dependent on the raising of sons and the passing on of the lessons of manhood, a dynamic Arthur Miller plays out to a tragic conclusion in his play *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Miller's play is instructive in that it highlights the gap that frequently existed between the idealization of the man as confident provider and the reality that white-collar salaries frequently did not allow for the level of spending that suburban life encouraged; the pressure to go further and further into debt was thus ever-present. As May notes,

> in spite of widespread prosperity, the provider role was a heavy burden, and not all men could be successful at it. Nor was the status of the family breadwinner always adequate compensation for an otherwise monotonous or dissatisfying job. Just as material goods could contribute to marital harmony or even compensate for unhappiness to some extent, the failure to achieve or appreciate the fruits of prosperity could cause tension. (177)

Or, as sociologist Morris Zelditch stated in a 1955 study,

> the American male, by definition, *must* "provide" for his family. He is *responsible* for the support of his wife and children. His primary area of performance is the occupational role, in which his status fundamentally inheres; and his *primary* function in the family is to provide "income," to be the "breadwinner." There is simply something wrong with the American adult male who doesn't have a "job." (339; emphases in original)

The unintentional (we assume) irony of the scare quotes Zelditch employs around his key terms is serendipitous, for it highlights the ambivalence the cultural imperatives attached to "income," "jobs," and the role of "breadwinner" came to have for many men. Emblematic of this situation was the swiftness with which Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) became a contemporary classic, spawning a film version starring Gregory Peck within a year.[9] Wilson's protagonist Thomas Rath struggles to support his wife Betsy and their three children, works (initially) at a tedious corporate job, and hates his house but cannot afford to improve it or buy a new one. Although the novel fell out of print in the years after its initial publication, at the time it was enormously popular; it has since become synonymous with 1950s conformity and its discontents.[10]

The discontent central to *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* is significant to our discussion because it articulates dissatisfaction with the failed promise of prosperity and domesticity, the concomitant effect of which was a putative crisis of masculinity. This "crisis" found its scholarly corollary in certain sociological writings of the time. Indeed, Wilson's fictional treatment of the pressures of the Cold War consensus is far less critical and pointed than was the academic sociological response. As Barbara Ehrenreich has chronicled, the attack launched by the likes of William Whyte (*The Organization Man* [1956]), David Riesman (*The Lonely Crowd* [1950]), and C. Wright Mills (*White Collar* [1956]) generally depicted the Tom Rath/Willy Loman figure as representative of the eclipse of the traditions of American manhood by a new ethos of domesticity and conformity. The American male, formerly synonymous with individualism, adventurousness, personal accomplishment, and innovation, was usurped by the figure of the "company" or "organization" man—the husband who sacrifices personal agency for financial security, ambition for family, urban cosmopolitanism for bland suburban life.

Indeed, the suburbs became the *bête noire* for such authors as these. As Catherine Jurca notes in an essay on Wilson's novel, "The suburb of the middle class is to postwar sociology and literature what the slum was to the Chicago School of sociology between the wars and proletarian fiction of the Depression" (84). Each of the books mentioned above devotes chapters to attacking the suburbs. In a 1957 essay entitled "The Suburban Dislocation," David Riesman effectively summarizes the critique when he characterizes the suburbs as a space "in which like-mindedness reverberates upon itself as the potentially various selves within each of us do not get evoked or recognized" (134). Such popular books, as well as a number of less measured and more caustic tracts by the vociferous Philip Wylie,[11] collectively constitute a subgenre of sociological jeremiads on the sacrifice of American masculinity on the altar of suburban conformity. To quote Riesman again, "the new neatly assembled suburbs, with their handsome school plants and their neighborly fraternalism, are the consumption side of the managerial economy, valuing a similar 'social ethic' and suffering from a similar lack of ultimate goals" ("Dislocation" 126). Gradually dying out, Riesman laments, are the "inner-directed" individuals of America's past, men who were their own masters; increasingly, the norm has become the "other-directed," those who suborn their egos and ambitions to the pressures of work, family, and society at large (*Lonely Crowd* 9). Both Riesman and Whyte lament the decline of the Protestant Ethic, something more or less replaced, Whyte suggests, by a "social ethic" wherein the "upward path toward the rainbow of achievement leads smack through the conference room" (18). The prominence of the committee as an integral aspect of the Organization, Whyte suggests, quite simply negates the possibility for "'rugged' individualism that is supposed to be the business of business" (18).

While neither Whyte nor Riesman addresses a crisis of masculinity *per se*—they do not explicitly frame their discussions in those terms—such a reading is more than implicit in their critiques insofar as their language connotes a feminization of men who allow themselves to be seduced by the organization.

It is not, Whyte suggests, merely an issue of *working* for the organization so much as *belonging* to it: these workers are "the ones who have left home, spiritually as well as physically, to take the vows of organization life" (3). "Taking the vows" is here doubly suggestive, of marriage on the one hand and the priesthood on the other—both instances of the subordination of self. The organization man thus becomes either a wife or, figuratively, a eunuch.

C. Wright Mills's *White Collar* articulates this sense of feminization more explicitly. For Mills, the traditional figure of the self-employed entrepreneur was the ultimate embodiment of American masculinity,[12] something lost in the shift into a corporate context in which "work" became redefined as "the handling of paper and money and people" (65) rather than the hands-on experience of production. Indeed, Mills maintains, "The one thing they do not do is live by making things; rather, they live off the social machinery that organizes and coordinates people who make things" (65). If the white-collar worker has any product, it is himself, for where "in the world of the small entrepreneur, men sold goods to one another," in the white-collar world, "they first of all sell their services" (182). In a chapter titled "The Personality Market," Mills likens the new need to be concerned about appearance, dress, and manners to the preoccupations of "salesgirls."

3. Mills's overt feminization of the white-collar worker makes explicit what is otherwise implicit in Whyte and Riesman, namely that the displacement of traditional masculinities not only resulted in less manly men, but men who were female surrogates—dominated by the feminine preoccupations of the household or, worse, given to homosexual tendencies and proclivities.

Arguably, the most extreme manifestation of this masculinist anxiety was the prevalence and popularity of film noir. As has been argued in a number of studies, noir constituted a significant alternative to the rhetoric of consensus, articulating discontent with the "other-directed" life through its representations of tough, independent hard-boiled men and dangerous femmes fatales. Sylvia Harvey has gone so far as to argue that such classic noir films as *Double Indemnity* (1944) constitute a symbolic revolt against family and marriage, and that in fact marriage and "normal" or respectable life become symbolically inverted, representative of social discontent. Noir can thus be read as the counter-narrative of consensus, as is argued by Frank Krutnik:

> within the 1940s' generic spectrum the *noir* "tough" thrillers became institutionalized as the principal vehicle for the articulation of such ambivalence and negativity (at a time when, following the dramatic postwar increase in the marriage rate, there was elsewhere in society a heightened glorification of the family as a social ideal). (61)

The figure of the hard-boiled detective, as embodied in the fiction of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett and the iconic performances of Humphrey Bogart, had already become something of a cliché by the time *The Puppet Masters* was published in 1951. It is thus quite interesting that Heinlein appropriates the language and tone of classic noir to set the stage for his sf novel, not the least reason being his conflation of two popular—and popu-

list—genres, the first (noir) tending to express anxieties about conformity and the latter (sf invasion) about communism.

In the absence of some of the typical noir furniture such as the back-alley office or dark and shadowy, rain-misted streets—the symbolism of which works in part to establish the hero's disconnection and/or dislocation—Heinlein's novel nevertheless works to similar ends by initially emphasizing the mutability of Cavanaugh's identity. Indeed, "Sam Cavanaugh" is merely the first alias the principal character receives. While we do ultimately learn his real name and, further, that the Old Man is in fact his father, the first half to two-thirds of the story is more principally concerned with establishing Sam as "Sam," a contingent identity, a man literally of a dozen faces. His very appearance can be—and, it is suggested, frequently *is*—surgically altered by the Section's "Cosmetics" department. Cavanaugh takes a certain grim pride in both his mutability and expendability.

While playing out the typical characteristics of the hard-boiled hero, Sam's ability and willingness to subordinate identity, ego, and life to the Section are significantly *a*typical of the genre, in which the hero's liminality is generally portrayed as necessary to his maintenance of a cohesive and guarded self. Sam is liminal insofar as his work is secret, kept from the light of day. Nevertheless, he is subject to the whims of authority and to the institutional structures of both the military and intelligence communities depicted in the novel. Conversely, as mentioned above, the noir hero's personal world is notably self-contained, structured around a series of personal, ethical, and professional codes, separate and distinct from those of society at large. These codes are the hero's bulwark against the corruptions and erosions of self inherent to participation in mainstream culture: his withdrawal to the periphery of what is legally and socially acceptable frequently represents an attempt to maintain a stable and uncompromised ego.

Heinlein's inversion of a trend typical of the hard-boiled genre creates in the character of Sam a *tabula rasa*. While maintaining the basic characteristics of individualistic, disconnected, intuitive, and physically competent heroes such as Sam Spade or Mike Hammer, Heinlein's re-imagination of them in Sam Cavanaugh figures the type as essentially superficial, a point of departure rather than arrival. The trajectory of Sam's growth as a character is very specifically *away* from his professional isolation at the outset of the novel and into a much broader community at the end, a community of which he ultimately comes to be the leader.

Key to Sam's transformation are the characters of the Old Man and Mary—the patriarch to unseat and the femme fatale to domesticate. As mentioned above, "Old Man" is doubly significant, as he is revealed about halfway through the novel to be Sam's biological father. As the leader of "the Section," the Old Man's authority over his agents is absolute ("Not that he was a soft boss. He was quite capable of saying, 'Boys, we need to fertilize this oak tree. Just jump in that hole at its base and I'll cover you up'" [3]), and he is virtually untouchable in the political hierarchy, having the president's ear whenever he wants it. That he is not identified as Sam's father for the first half

of the novel is significant in that it establishes him as the *symbolic* father well before he assumes the role as the literal patriarch. For the initial reconnaissance mission into the area of the alien crash site, he poses as Sam's father while Mary plays the role of the sister, creating a mock family at the outset that establishes lines of prohibition Sam must overcome as the narrative progresses. Seeing Sam's instinctive reaction to Mary, the Old Man rebukes him: "Tut tut, Sammy—there's no incest in the Cavanaugh family. You were both carefully brought up.... Your sister dotes on you and you are extremely fond of your sister, but in a clean-cut, sickeningly chivalrous, All-American-Boy sort of way" (5). That this dynamic is overtly Freudian goes without saying. More importantly, the "happy family" with which we are presented at the outset is merely a façade, one of the multiple roles Sam has been trained to play; by novel's end, this fictional family unit will exist in *fact*, suggesting a trajectory for Sam that moves from illusion to reality, from merely playing at a character to seriously committing to a social role.

Critical to this particular reading of Heinlein's novel is the fact that the fortunes of Sam et al. in the war against the "slugs" are inextricably tied to his evolution along this narrative trajectory. During his time of maturation, the alien invaders quickly and efficiently conquer the larger portion of the USA, leaving only the coasts clear of their infestation—regions that only manage to keep themselves "clean" by enforcing a near-naked rule of law that prevents the alien parasites from hiding underneath people's clothes. Even with this extreme measure, the war goes badly for the humans as more spaceships land and the possessed individuals in the "Red Zone" attempt further expansion by launching military strikes into the clean areas.

Sam's evolution as a character parallels his increasing (albeit reluctant) involvement in the decision-making processes of command. His first major breakthrough comes in a moment of self-sacrifice. Having been possessed for a time by one of the aliens and a helpless accomplice to their initial insidious infiltration, he is recaptured by the Section and restored to himself, though not without suffering significant psychological trauma from the experience. The Old Man, however, asks him to accede to being possessed again (by the same slug) so they might interrogate the alien and glean important intelligence about their motives and origins. Unsurprisingly, Sam recoils in horror at the prospect:

> I started to explain how I felt, that I was not afraid to die, no more than normal, but I could not stand the thought of dying while possessed by a parasite.... Even worse was the thought of *not* dying once the slug touched me. But I could not say it; there were still no words to describe what the race had not experienced. (95)

He refuses the Old Man outright, not something, given his earlier descriptions of his authority, we would have thought possible. When Sam sees that the person volunteering to be "hag-ridden" is Mary, however, he refuses to allow her to submit to it and angrily agrees to do it himself.

This incident is worth considering, because it introduces two key transition points for Sam: first, it evinces something other than blind obedience to the Old Man's wishes, and secondly, it is a gesture of pure self-sacrifice—not sacrificing

his life, which according to his repeated claims he has no qualms about—but sacrificing his individuality, autonomy, and personality. The trauma of being possessed by a slug, as is articulated quite plainly at various points, is that very loss of self from which some do not recover.

Sam's selfless (if coerced) act functions in two ways. As a symbolic gesture it provides a contrast to his later loss of autonomy when he assumes the mantle of command with its concomitant responsibilities. Further, when he and Mary reconcile over what Sam incorrectly perceives to be Mary's willing role in manipulating him into capitulating to the Old Man, she accedes to his marriage proposal. Sam's act of sacrifice is thus figured as a step in maturation, a combination of the beginnings of his independence from the Old Man and his newfound concern for another person—and by extension, for a community.

Upon being wed, Sam quickly moves to stake out his rights as a husband. When it becomes apparent that a series of incidents in Mary's childhood on Venus, buried deep in her unconscious, might hold a key to finding the aliens' weakness, she becomes a much-probed and examined subject, to Sam's (predictable) ire. Against the battalions of hypnotists, scientists, psychologists, and military men, Sam the possessive husband draws his line in the sand—the climax of which comes when he confronts his father and figuratively stares him down. Upon being told by the Old Man that he has no place in the examination room with Mary, something snaps:

> Up to that moment it had not occurred to me to question the Old Man's right to stay—but I found myself announcing my decision as I made it. "You are the one with no business here—*you* are not an analyst. So get out."
>
> The Old Man glanced at Mary and so did I. Nothing showed in her face; she might have been waiting for me to make change. The Old Man said slowly, "You been eating raw meat, son?"
>
> I answered, "It's my wife who is being experimented on; from now on I make the rules—or there won't be any experiments." (300)

The Old Man backs down, and later informs Sam that, from this point on, Sam will be the new head of the Section. In response to his son's incredulous protests, he says calmly, "I've known that you would take over some day.... Now you've done it—by bucking my judgment on an important matter, forcing your will on me, and by being justified in the outcome" (308). The inevitability with which the Old Man frames the situation emphasizes the Oedipal dimension to the drama and places Sam in the role of the father—both in the literal sense (Mary soon announces her pregnancy) and metaphorically as a national leader, replacing his own father as the President's key advisor and taking responsibility for the safety of the human race.

At this point Sam makes the final transition from the archetypal hard-boiled loner to the model of the 1950s patriarch—i.e., the strong masculine figure at the center of the nuclear family that constitutes a microcosm of the healthy nation-state. Sam's role as father/leader evokes the prevalent rhetoric of the early Cold War that made an explicit causal connection between the strength of the family and that of the nation: the policing of the self against incursion was as crucial as the Strategic Air Command bombers patrolling the skies, and the

responsibility for the inviolability of the family fell of course to the father. These metaphorical connections were rendered visually in such public service publications as the "National Civil Defense Pattern" (depicted in Figure 1), in which the *paradiso*-like concentric circles of the nation center upon the strong, square-shouldered (white) figure of "the individual," who in the organization of the imagery—positioned firmly in front of the women and children—is unequivocally figured as the father.

Heinlein sketches this latter-day body-politic/body-natural dynamic in nigh mythical fashion, insofar as Sam also plays the role of the hero of the fisher-king myth: having symbolically slain the old king (manifested when the Old Man meekly asks "what are your orders, sir?" [308]), he is now prepared to heal the realm of its sickness. Again, *The Puppet Masters*, leaving nothing to interpretive chance, collapses the allegory—this time with regards to infection and disease. The aliens are explicitly figured throughout the novel as infectious parasites, a trope consistent with the Cold War rhetoric that characterized communism as a disease. To make this particular connection even more explicit, the question Sam himself asked earlier about whether the slugs had penetrated behind the Iron Curtain is answered when they receive news that Russia and China have been decimated by the bubonic plague—a result of the aliens' inattention to basic human hygiene and sanitation. This inadvertent extermination through disease (which M. Keith Booker calls "a bit of anticommunist fantasy" [50] on Heinlein's part), also serves to further draw a literal connection between the alien infestation and sickness. Sam becomes extremely concerned that the same fate might await those possessed Americans in the Red Zone: "we'd better do

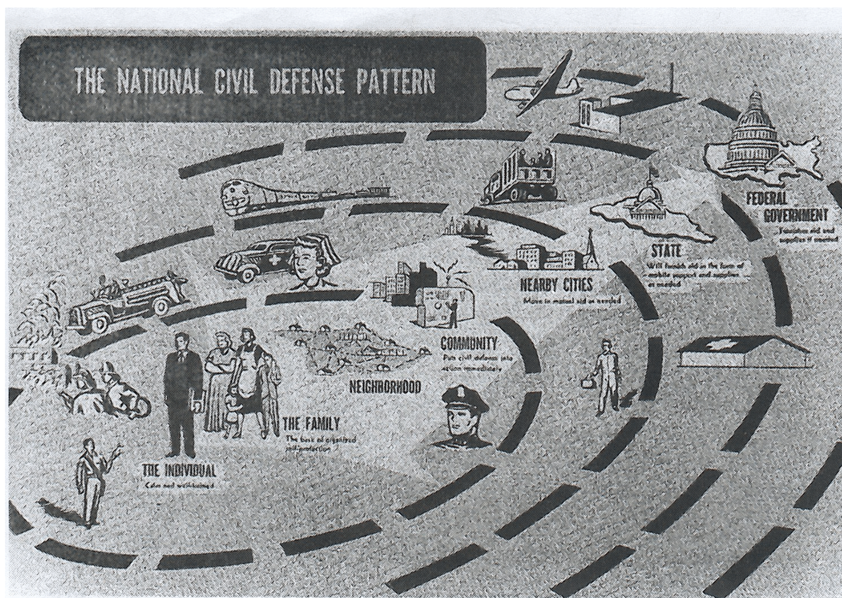

Figure 1

something fast," he declares, "or the whole Mississippi Valley will be in the same shape Asia is in. Just one rat, just one little rat...." (296). Hence his job becomes not merely to heal the country in the metaphorical sense, but in the literal sense too, to stave off the inevitable illness facing his fellow already-"infected" countrymen.

Adding one more level to this dynamic is the ultimate solution at which Sam arrives—namely, to introduce a deadly virus to the region. The search through Mary's unconscious reveals that she was possessed by an alien while a child living with her family as colonists on Venus. She survived because she proved immune to the "nine-day fever," an extremely contagious virus that killed its host in nine days. The slugs prove less resistant, dying off the back of the infected humans in half that time. Sam proposes a plan that would spread the virus through the Red Zone, and after the aliens died but before the humans could succumb, teams would circulate through with antitoxins.

Thus, Sam plays the role of literal and figurative healer, saving his country from not one but two levels of disease. And he does so having become the uncontested patriarch, the principal voice at the center of the war effort, and the "genius" he never knew he was. He rejects that label at first, having been informed of his latent genius by his father after he takes his stand against him; after devising the plan for cleaning up the Red Zone, however, he finds the descriptor a better fit:

> I was beginning to like being a "genius".... Mary opened her eyes when I came in and gave me that long heavenly smile. I reached down and smoothed her hair. "Howdy, flame top, did you know that your husband is a genius?"
>
> "Yes."
>
> "You did? You never said so."
>
> "You never asked me." (314)

There are two crucial elements to unpack here: first, in assuming the role of genius, Sam appropriates the last aspect of the Old Man's character that had made him the singular individual capable of leading the Section. From the outset of the novel, Sam has been in awe of the subtlety of his father's mind. He says of him, shortly after discovering the alien threat, that "The Old Man had cracked the case, analyzed it, and come up with the right answer in a little more than twenty-four hours. His unique gift was the ability to reason logically with unfamiliar, hard-to-believe facts as easily as with the commonplace" (26-27). That Sam can assume the same function and indeed surpass his father is the penultimate confirmation of his transformation into the symbolic father; the ultimate confirmation is that provided by his wife, whose judgment on the matter can only be offered when Sam himself becomes cognizant of his change.

The second crucial element here is the newfound meekness on the part of Mary. Sam is not the only character to undergo a radical transformation: if Sam comes to embody the consensus ideal of the father, Mary becomes a stereotype of the domesticated wife. When Sam stands toe to toe with his father over his presence in the examining room and Mary looks on mildly ("Nothing showed in her face; she might have been waiting for me to make change" [300]), her interactions with him for the rest of the novel are reduced to mere obedience and

submission to his wishes. In fact, the phrase she utters most frequently after this point (when she does speak) is simply "Yes dear" (299, 300, 339).

Mary's radical change from dangerous, competent, and independent woman into a mere supplement to her husband—as well as, indeed, a passive open book in terms of the invasive excavation of her unconscious, the fruits of which enable Sam to assume the mantle of "genius"—is, on the surface, the most puzzling and troubling aspect of Heinlein's novel. The overt hobbling of the novel's one strong female character is so swift and seemingly bizarre (few, on reading the initial descriptions of Mary, would predict such a character shift) that it distracts rather glaringly from the narrative. Heinlein's misogynistic turn, however, is very specifically in step with the Cold War politics of gender containment: as detailed by Elaine Tyler May, the postwar period exerted a significant pressure on women to exit the work environment upon marriage and devote themselves to tending their husbands' needs. To again quote Morris Zelditch's prescriptive 1955 essay on the subject, while American women may "hold jobs *before* they are married, they quit when 'the big day' comes" (339; emphasis in original). Mary's shift constitutes a figurative "quitting," insofar as she effectively checks out of the Section and subordinates her impressive personality to her husband's ascendancy.

It becomes clear at this point that the novel's principal allegory has less to do with the communist threat *per se* than with the means of best combating it. The slugs *are* communism: in terms of Heinlein's representations there can be no ambiguity on this point. But as has often been observed about Heinlein's perspective on the war between the US and the Soviet Union, he did not see the Cold War as winnable. Communism was not a concrete foe so much as, ultimately, an ineradicable ideological abstraction. Significantly, at the outset of *The Puppet Masters*, the US has fought communism to an unresolved stalemate: in spite of World War III having taken place some time before the story's start, the Iron Curtain still looms implacably over Asia. As David Seed notes, Heinlein feared that "Communism was a set of beliefs as well as the official ideology of a power bloc and might therefore never be defeated" (*American SF* 30). Such is the situation at the end of *The Puppet Masters*, in spite of Sam's ingenious solution: "there is no getting Humpty-Dumpty back together. In spite of the almost complete success of Schedule Mercy there is no way to be sure that the slugs are all gone" (337). The "moral" of the story is not teleological but one of process—i.e., the novel works as an allegorical *bildungsroman* in which Sam leaves behind immature individualism for adult responsibility.

NOTES

1. While the voluminous writing on the subject of film noir disagrees on the particulars of periodization, the ten-year span from 1945-1955 is generally accepted as the noir renaissance.

2. See Ehrenreich for an exemplary study of the 1950s "crisis of masculinity" and its reverberating effects in postwar American culture.

3. It is worth mentioning *Starship Troopers* (1959) here as there are a number of parallels between the novels that help frame *The Puppet Masters* within the context of the Cold War. Notably, the two novels, published in 1951 and 1959 respectively, effectively

bookend the Eisenhower years, an administration inextricably associated in the popular imagination with the Cold War consensus. Both novels portray a collectivized enemy governed by a hive mind, the slugs on the one hand and "Bugs" (giant intelligent insects) on the other. More specific to my theme here, both works are invested in forms of hypermasculine identity. In contrast to Sam Cavanaugh's hard-boiled, world-weary secret agent in *The Puppet Masters* is Johnny Rico's no-nonsense infantry grunt; and while Johnny lacks Sam's worldly savvy, both express an ironclad code of honor and duty. Also of interest in this respect is Johnny's aw-shucks, boyish naiveté as regards women—a perhaps significant element in light of Heinlein's more overtly countercultural investigations of sex and sexuality in later novels. Why the bashfulness in a genre—the soldier's story—so frequently given to off-duty sexual escapades? I would argue that Johnny Rico's almost hayseed-like courtliness with the opposite sex is of a piece with Sam's designs on marriage: both articulate a traditional conception of masculine duty that ultimately draws very specifically gendered lines in the sand, in which spheres of duty and responsibility for men and women are explicitly conflated with success in defeating the non-individuated enemy. For a comparative critique of Heinlein's representation of *Puppet Masters*' slugs and *Starship Troopers*' Bugs in terms of the author's fervent anticommunism, see Franklin (117).

4. Not his real name, as Sam is quick to inform us: his duties for the Section require frequent wholesale identity changes. His real name, we eventually discover, is Elihu Nivens, but for the sake of simplicity I will refer to him by his initial alias.

5. It should be noted here that the edition I have used for this paper is not the version originally published in 1951, but a "revised" edition published in 1990. It was not Heinlein himself who revised the text (he died two years previously), but his widow Virginia, who restored to the novel significant sections that had been excised at Heinlein's editors' behest prior to the original publication. Interestingly, a number of the omitted sections—like the one just quoted about Sam's waking beside the nameless blonde—tend to be more in line with the darker aspect of the hard-boiled genre. This should not perhaps be surprising, as one of the novel's principal demographics was (and to a certain extent still is) adolescent boys; Heinlein himself, in a letter to Lurton Blassingame, assumes that an editor "will want the sex in this toned down," a change that will be "easy" to do (*Grumbles* 162). While on one hand citing a post-1950s edition might seem to weaken my argument, I would hasten to add that I speak not of the *influence* this novel had so much as how Heinlein's narrative constitutes its own unique response to the contradictions of the Cold War consensus—and while the omission of sections such as the one quoted above somewhat waters down the noir qualities of the novel, they are nonetheless present, and in the original manuscript quite striking.

6. Think, for example, of virtually every pairing of Bogart and Bacall; as Gerald Mast notes, "in *The Big Sleep* [1946], as in *To Have and Have Not* [1944], the Bogart character can synthesize the demands of love and honor because the woman he confronts becomes a woman with whom he can work—for she, too, has a personal code of integrity and honor" (275); similarly, the infamous rapid-fire exchange between Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray in *Double Indemnity* (1944), another exemplar of the need for the noir couple to match each other in terms of ability, parallels the verbal sparring of Sam and Mary when Sam first proposes their union.

7. See Evans and Latham, as well as Seed's *American SF* and "Alien Invasions."

8. See especially Seed's excellent discussion of both *Body Snatchers* and *The Puppet Masters* in "Alien Invasions." While framing the narratives broadly as communist-invasion allegories, Seed nevertheless qualifies such a reading as being only partial and does a good job of unpacking the sexual politics of the novels. One telling point details

a sequence in the novel *Body Snatchers* when Miles (the protagonist), aware of the change that has been wrought on the townspeople, overhears possessed individuals pretending to engage in social pleasantries. Seed writes, "Where we have earlier seen the house signifying sexual space it now connotes a social area from which Miles is excluded" (160). The façade being enacted by the pod people not only evokes the specter of the infiltrator "passing," but it also suggests the superficiality and ultimate shallowness of middle-class suburban existence. Similarly, the scene in the film version of *Body Snatchers* in which Miles and Becky look down from a second-floor window on the changed townspeople converging on the town square connotes passive conformity; the high-angle shot, further, is a totalizing gesture effacing individual difference and agency. Again, one of the obvious readings of these elements is that of a brainwashed populace, but as Peter Biskind has pointed out (137-45), texts like *Body Snatchers* call into question whether the most threatening source of such an outcome is incursion from without or conformity from within.

9. One also notes the serendipity of the concurrence of Jack Finney's *The Body Snatchers* and Wilson's novel, both of which were published in 1955 and both of which were adapted to film in 1956.

10. On the resonance of the "gray flannel" stereotype during the 1950s, see Ehrenreich (29-41).

11. On Wylie's relevance to Cold War issues, see Seed, "Postwar Jeremiads."

12. See also Corber's discussion of Mills and Cold War masculinity (30-36).

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ABSTRACT

In his 1951 novel *The Puppet Masters*, Robert A. Heinlein attempts to resolve a cultural paradox central to the Cold War consensus in the US—namely, the contradiction between the paranoia about Communist collectivism and the overpowering middle-class pressure toward suburban conformity. Making use of the conventions of noir narratives, Heinlein depicts a "secret agent" protagonist whose efficacy in fighting an alien invasion—a thinly-veiled allegory of communism—derives from his slow evolution from hard-boiled lone wolf to community-oriented family man.

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