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Manipulation and Profits: The Corporate World in “Mister Squishy”

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Abstract

This thesis will discuss the American corporate world and how it is presented within David Foster Wallace’s “Mister Squishy”. This research contributes to the discussion about the practices of American corporations while analyzed through a literary lens. Wallace’s work has been connected to the corporate world before from business and management perspectives. Throughout the thesis, the depiction of American companies within “Mister Squishy” will be discussed. By means of a close reading of the story, marketing practices and manipulation will be analyzed, as well as society versus the individual, and invasion of privacy and the American dream focalized through Terry Schmidt, one of the main characters. This will result in the conclusion that the story contains a certain critique of the practices within companies such as Mister Squishy and Reesemeyer Shannon Belt, that both resemble the reality of the corporate environment, and how consumers and employees are used by corporations in order to gain profit. Therefore, American corporations are depicted negatively within “Mister Squishy”.

## Introduction

This thesis is about David Foster Wallace's "Mister Squishy", a short story that takes place within the corporate world of America. The story is about market research for a product called *Felonies!*, where the reader is involved in the characters' stream of consciousness and provided an insight to how marketing optimization and manipulation take place. The book that the story appeared in, *Oblivion*, was published in 2004, but the story itself first appeared in *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* in 2000. Because the story describes the internal processes of an American corporation, "Mister Squishy" is suitable to provide both a literary analysis as well as a look into how American writers such as Wallace view the corporate world and how it is featured in this piece. Even though there has not been a lot of research conducted to the combination of these two topics, i.e. both a literary analysis and an organizational one, Wallace has done many interviews throughout his career, which will be elaborated on to evaluate what his views on the corporate and political world were and how he translated this into a short story.

Wallace's unique writing style as well as the storyline itself and the topics discussed above can be analyzed through a close reading of the story. This way, the contents of the story will provide an idea of how Wallace displays American corporations and whether this can be interpreted as criticism from his part. Wallace's writing techniques, literary influences and views on the corporate world will be discussed. Wallace seems to criticize big corporations such as those involved in the story, Mister Squishy and Reesemeyer Shannon Belt, and presents their marketing strategies as well as manipulation of the American consumers. In addition, he metaphorically and indirectly incorporates the concept of the American dream, which will be explained by means of its definition and extrinsic and intrinsic goals.

In the third section, the story itself will be analyzed in order to see to what extent Wallace placed criticism on the corporate world of America, through including marketing

strategies, the existential crisis of one of the characters, Terry Schmidt, and the question of privacy. Mainly through discussing how these motifs are written by Wallace, the third section will provide evidence of how American corporations are displayed within “Mister Squishy”.

## Section 1: Historical and Theoretical Context

David Foster Wallace was an American writer born in Ithaca, New York, in February 1962. He attended Amherst College in Amherst, Massachusetts, where he graduated with a major in English and philosophy in 1985. He then completed a master’s degree in creative writing at the University of Arizona in 1987, the same year his first novel, *The Broom of the System*, was published, which was originally his honors thesis. Even though Wallace’s focus was on writing, he also taught English Literature at Emerson College in Boston, and would later on teach Creative Writing at Pomona College in Claremont, California. His second novel, *Infinite Jest* (1996), was placed on *Time Magazine*’s list of the hundred best English-language novels that were published between the years of 1923 and 2005. Like the protagonist of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace was a promising tennis player during his middle- and high school years. He also wrote multiple non-fiction works, which included essays about the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks for *Rolling Stone Magazine*, and the US Open tournament for *Tennis Magazine*, where he also writes about the capitalization of the tournament. Even though Wallace appeared to be a very successful writer, he was struggling with mental illness for an extended period of time. On September 12, 2008, he took his own life.

Wallace’s early works are often categorized as post-modernist pieces, among others by D.T. Max. In the beginning of his writing career, he was inspired by writers such as Thomas Pynchon and Donald Barthelme, specifically the short story “The Balloon”. According to Max, who wrote Wallace’s biography, he was intrigued by this story because it was not a straightforward piece. Max writes that Barthelme “sought to fracture the surface of fiction to

show the underpinnings on which its illusions depended” (29), and that Wallace said that Barthelme’s “The Balloon” was the first story that “rang his cherries” (29). In addition to that, Pynchon’s novel *The Crying of Lot 49* also played a big role in forming Wallace’s post-modernist writing style, as Max states that “Wallace reading Pynchon was, remembers Costello, ‘like Bob Dylan finding Woody Guthrie’” (31). Wallace often used metaphors and long sentences to compose stories that are ambiguous, vague and complicated and require the reader’s undisrupted attention in order to be understood.

During the 1990s, Wallace’s writing had evolved from postmodernism into a writing style called new sincerity, which can also be called post-postmodernism. As much as he relied on irony and cynicism for his earlier works, he felt he was now an “anti-rebel”: “in his eyes, sincerity was a virtue and saying what you meant a calling” (Max 157). Even though the ‘new sincerity’ discipline emerged in the 1980s, Wallace played a big role in making it a popular style for writers to come. Joshua Roiland states that in an interview in 2006, Wallace mentions he uses the postmodern techniques for traditional ends (95), which signifies that even though he wrote in a sincere style, he did not completely discard the post-modernist ways. In “Mister Squishy”, the two styles are combined, as it contains the post-modernist elements of irony and critique, and the maximalist writing style that can be associated with new sincerity.

Aside from his novels and non-fiction works, Wallace wrote his fair share of short stories throughout his career. These were first published in magazines such as *The New Yorker*, *Esquire* and *Harper’s Magazine*, and later as collections, the last of which was *Oblivion* (2004), which opens with “Mister Squishy”. In this piece, Wallace describes the internal functioning of an American corporation and the processes behind market research. Even though “Mister Squishy” was written during the time he likely had already switched to new sincerity, the story could be interpreted as critique and analysis of modern society and

how American corporations treat their staff. Wallace also discusses the political system, capitalism and the role of American companies within this system in an interview in *The New York Review of Books*, stating that in modern day America, corporations are often able to control politics due to the large amount of money they are able to donate to campaigns, which results in laws that favor them even more. This way, they gain more and more power gradually. In the interview, he says: “You end up with this increasing distortion of American values where everything becomes about money and selling and buying and display” (Karmodi 1). This is also evident in “Mister Squishy”, where the corporation is constantly concerned with the amount of product they will be able to sell.

The writing style of “Mister Squishy” corresponds well with Wallace’s ‘maximalist’ style, according to Adam Kelly (52). He says that “[his] language saturates its object of discussion rather than approaching it tentatively in the mode of a more reserved, minimalist author like Coetzee” (53). In contrast to minimalist writing, Wallace describes almost anything in his stories, to the point where most of the context he provides seems slightly irrelevant. For instance, he describes one of the characters, Terry Schmidt, saying that “his sleeves were not rolled up” (4). Even though this might seem like useless information to the reader, it is instead just another manner of illustrating and forming the character in the reader’s eyes – with this information incorporated, the reader forms a mental image of the character that is more accurate to his personality, as Schmidt comes across as decent and slightly uptight. In addition to that, Wallace uses many abbreviations, sometimes explained in footnotes, such as UAF, meaning Unintroduced Assistant Facilitators, and sometimes only mentioned in the text a few times or left unexplained, for example IRP, GRDS, and even chemical notations such as  $C_6H_8(OH)_6$ , in which case it is up to the reader to figure out what is meant within the context of the story. Elsewhere, the full meanings are explained – such as

“The Focus Group”, which Wallace then mostly tends to abbreviate throughout the rest of the story as TFG.

Wallace also uses footnotes in “Mister Squishy” – though fewer than elsewhere, for instance in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* or in *Infinite Jest* – which can distract the reader from the storyline itself. Besides that, Wallace variates between short and very long, multiple-clause sentences, that can at times take up more than three pages. The short sentences can cause the reader to read faster, thus create a sense of urgency – this is mostly used in the scenes where the unnamed man climbs up the building. The longer sentences, a style that is often used by Wallace to illustrate a moment of reflection, seem to take the reader along within the mind of the character speaking at that moment. With this technique, called a stream of consciousness, he further explains the character and his thoughts. This way, it also provides the reader with a unique look into the life within American corporations from the perspective of the employees, as the focalization shifts between several characters throughout the story.

## Section 2: The Corporate American World

The late 1980s and early 1990s were a period of economic change within the United States, and in “Mister Squishy”, it is mentioned that the story takes place on a “bright cold November day in 1995” (Wallace 5), which is why the context presented will mainly include the 1990s and the developments within the economy and the business world that occurred during this time period. In the story, there is also an element of the American Dream, which will be further explained in the last section.

From approximately 1987 until 1991, the American economy faced a big recession. However, in the years after that, it resettled and the economy began to thrive, bringing unemployment back and creating more jobs (Mishel and Bernstein 13). During this time,

employees were considered an asset to companies, often referred to as ‘human resources’, a term that was first used by the economist John R. Commons in 1893, and the concept of the learning organization was implemented in the management world. To improve the internal processes of companies, the learning organization enabled employees to gain knowledge and the organization overall would develop. In *Organization Science*, Herbert A. Simon defines the concept: “All learning takes place inside individual human heads; an organization learns in only two ways: (a) by the learning of its members, or (b) by ingesting new members who have knowledge the organization didn't previously have” (130). Employees are also sometimes referred to as ‘human capital’ by, for instance, Jackson and Schuler, who state that “skills, experience, and knowledge have economic value to organizations because they enable it to be productive and adaptable; thus, people constitute the organization's human capital” (241). The organization needs its employees to book results, and the employees need the organization to accomplish personal development and earn a salary, which makes it a co-dependent relationship. In “Mister Squishy”, this is also present in the organization, as the focus groups are implemented not only to improve the quality of the product, *Felonies!* but also to improve marketing strategies within Reesemeyer Shannon Belt, thus encouraging learning from an experience within the organization. These focus groups would serve the purpose of improving and expanding the companies in the story. Further analyzing of this will be done in the third section.

The concept of the American dream is also represented within the story. Basically, it entails (young) Americans aspiring to subjective greatness, or their interpretation of success, by climbing the metaphorical ladder within their field or occupation, regardless of their race and their social or economic background. In 1931, the phrase was explained by James Truslow Adams: “It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of



which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (404). In the perception of the working employees, they could start as a janitor, and end up as the manager or CEO at the same company, earning a high salary and respect, which to many of them would imply success. Realistically, this would be quite a hard goal to reach, and reaching the extrinsic, materialistic goals such as a high salary does not guarantee a happy, fulfilled life. Terry Schmidt, one of the main characters of “Mister Squishy”, also holds such goals for himself and struggles with his aspirations and dreams throughout the story, constantly wondering if he “could help change or make a difference” (Wallace 32), because his occupation as a focus group facilitator is quite pointless, and perhaps without his knowledge only requires him to help the larger machine, Reesemeyer Shannon Belt, obtain profit.

### Section 3: Analyzing “Mister Squishy”

The theme of the individual versus the collective occurs several times throughout the story. Mister Squishy, the company producing the cakes called *Felonies!*, has hired Reesemeyer Shannon Belt to explore the best way of marketing their sweet treats, and Team Δy executes this research in the form of focus groups. In order to test the marketing strategy for *Felonies!*, the people in the focus groups are asked to fill out questionnaires first, however the facilitator then asks them to discuss together and form a collective opinion. Reesemeyer Shannon Belt then compares whether the answers to the questionnaires they filled out individually match the answers provided by the group as a whole. In this sense, conforming to the collective as an individual is tested. Terry Schmidt, the facilitator of the focus group, also provides the example of teenagers all wearing the same clothes, that challenges the individual versus collective identity question, and he thinks that “kids as a demographic market today were notoriously herdlike and their individual choices in consumption were overwhelmingly

influenced by other kids' consumption-choices" (Wallace 23). If the individual's decisions are often influenced by the community, which is what Wallace shows here, do their choices still belong to them, or do they belong to a larger entity? This question can also be asked in regards to the outcomes of the research conducted by Team Δy. However, in the story it is said that these different types of research both have to be completed because the product has to appeal to both individual consumers and to "very large groups of them, groups that were yes comprised of individuals but were nevertheless groups" (Wallace 22). Wallace thus touches upon this theme and incorporates it into the story as a marketing strategy for *Felonies!*. This suggests that according to Wallace, American companies, or even companies in general, consider the collective to be more important than the individual, as marketing has to be aimed at demographic groups.

Another question raised is whether the individual truly matters in the grand scheme of life. Terry Schmidt, especially, struggles with this existential crisis throughout the story, constantly wondering if he is making a difference in the world. As he is one of the main characters in the story, the reader follows his stream of consciousness, which includes all of his doubts and dreams. Considering the fact that the story starts and ends in media res, the timeframe does not allow the Schmidt to develop much as a character, but his self-knowledge and the fact that Wallace provides a detailed background about his personality makes him quite a round character nonetheless. Because of Wallace's description of Schmidt's father, his sexual desires, his ambitions and his feelings about coworkers and himself, there is a depth to this character that does not appear in flat characters such as Darlene Lilley. It is clear that Schmidt is not happy with his occupation and his place in the world – he is constantly wishing for more and feeling that he is not doing enough, which Alexander Styhre describes as "the "vibe" or "perfume" of boredom and the sense of being subsumed under an administrative apparatus that is no longer able to provide meaningful work experience" (176). Wallace

himself talks about this ‘day in, day out’ working life in his commencement address “This is Water”. The doubts that Schmidt has seem like a fatal flaw which was inspired by his father. Wallace describes Schmidt’s father polishing his shoes, which “had formed a large unanalyzable part of the young Terry Schmidt’s determination to make a difference in the affairs of men someday in the future” (42). This is also where the American dream comes into the story: Schmidt wants to be the Senior Research Director for Team Δy, so that he will “receive a larger share of Team Δy’s after-tax profits and would be able to afford a nicer and better-appointed condominium” (Wallace 47). This conforms with the American dream: a higher salary, more respect from his coworkers and even a superior living space. This, in turn, leads to a materialistic view on life that can hardly be fulfilling, as these are all extrinsic goals. Schmuck, Kasser and Ryan say that these goals “are focused on obtaining rewards and the positive evaluations of others. Such goals generally reflect a sense of insecurity about oneself and also lead one to engage in more stressful, egoinvolved, and controlled behavior which does not satisfy one’s needs” (226). They also state that “intrinsic goals are those which are inherently satisfying to pursue because they are likely to satisfy innate psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, competence, and growth” (226). Schmidt’s goals to climb up to being Senior Research director therefore only satisfy his extrinsic needs, whereas the intrinsic ones such as contentment, self-acceptance and happiness can not be reached this way. Thus, only focusing on material possessions such as money and a bigger apartment will not fulfill Schmidt’s life in the long run.

The marketing assessment that is described in “Mister Squishy” at first seems straightforward – Team Δy conducts research in order to find the best advertising strategy for the product. However, Wallace reveals that “Team Δy’s real function was to present to Reesemeyer Shannon Belt test data that R.S.B. could then turn around and present to Client as confirming the soundness of the very [Overall Campaign Concept] that R.S.B. had already

billed Client in the millions for and couldn't turn back from" (44). In other words, Reesemeyer Shannon Belt is deliberately charging their clients for research that does not provide new information, as the focus groups are manipulated by the facilitators to deliver the results that are expected of them – not the outcome that would present itself without interference – in order to sell their marketing strategy. This could be seen as indirect criticism of large American corporations that adopt these practices in order to profit from others, because of the fact that Wallace describes this manipulation of the client. Michaelson states that “to treat consumers as worthwhile ends in themselves, marketers, Wallace suggests, would need not only to be consciously aware of the murky water of their practice but also to have the empathy to prioritize others' welfare” (219). He also then says that Wallace seems unsure that marketers truly keep the interests of the consumer and society as a whole in mind. Furthermore, the story reveals that manipulation in order to achieve the desired results is not the only purpose of the focus groups. The facilitators, among others Terry Schmidt and Darlene Lilley, are also participating in a study that is conducted from higher up in the advertising company by their superiors Alan Britton and Scott R. Laleman. This experiment investigates the extent to which the Field Researchers influence the “material outcome of the TFG's *in camera* deliberations and GRDSs” (Wallace 62), and in order to optimize the results, the Focus Group facilitators could be omitted according to Britton. In the story, online marketing is becoming a more advanced way of conducting market research, and while it fits the company's needs, it does not stand in line with the principles of human resource management. However, Wallace then writes that “not all would need to go. The Field men. That some could be kept. Transferred. Retrained to work the machines” (65), which is said by Alan Britton, Terry Schmidt's boss. This complies with organizational learning in the sense that the employees are then schooled to fill another position and the corporation overall will improve because of the new practices and adjustments to technology. Therefore, only part of

these practices can be interpreted as criticism of large companies for mistreating their staff, as the employees will most likely be transferred to other positions within the company. As mentioned before, Wallace has voiced his opinion on the distortion of American values (Karmodi 1), and it is evident in “Mister Squishy” that the main, or perhaps even the only concern of the corporations included is selling and making profit.

Invasion of privacy occurs in the story as well. The Focus Groups and their facilitators are being watched through cameras in order to observe the process of their decision-making, but the people participating in the market study are not aware of this. Presumably, this occurs in order to optimize marketing strategies within Reesemeyer Shannon Belt, but it seems as if Wallace is criticizing the lack of privacy that American consumers are given. This, namely, is also apparent when Scott Laleman is considering using ‘Cookies’ as market research instead: “the coming era involved finding ways to exploit cybercommerce’s staggering research potential as well. Undisplayed little tracking codes could be designed to tag and follow each consumer’s w<sup>3</sup> interests and spending patterns” (Wallace 63). This would also happen without the consumers’ knowledge of participating. In the present society, almost every company uses cookies to track consumers and expand their demographic in order to sell more product. Therefore, this is quite an invasion of privacy, used by corporations for their profit. Wallace might have seen this as such very early on in the internet-age, as with later developments in technology and social media, it would expand enormously.

## Conclusion

The main goal of this thesis has been to evaluate in what way American corporations and the American dream were featured in “Mister Squishy”. In interviews, Wallace spoke on the role of large companies within the American government. During the 1990s, the economic state of America was going through positive developments, which in turn lead to management

changes such as organizational learning. The American dream formed a big part in employees' expectations of their careers, which Wallace touches upon through Terry Schmidt, indirectly saying that pursuing materialistic goals will not bring fulfillment and leave the individual seeking approval from peers to measure happiness with. Since "Mister Squishy" takes place in a corporate environment, an analysis and close reading of the story has led to the conclusion that it contains certain criticism of companies such as Mister Squishy and Reesemeyer Shannon Belt, that both resemble the reality of the corporate environment. Because of the fact that marketing manipulation is very present and one of the main themes in the story, it places emphasis on real-life strategies used by powerful companies to make profit, thus not really caring much for the individual but only considering the collective a source of income. This is also evident in the question of privacy, since Reesemeyer Shannon Belt uses consumer information in order to optimize marketing strategies, in the process being oblivious to their employees' needs. This implies that Wallace criticized these companies for capitalization of others, consumers as well as employees, not keeping in mind the individual because it does not contribute to the agenda.

This research contributes to the discussion about the practices of American corporations because it was analyzed through a literary lens. Although researchers have connected Wallace's writing to the corporate world (Michaelson, Styhre), analyzing "Mister Squishy" provides a whole new look into what Wallace was really saying about the capitalization of America and how these corporations operate in terms of employees and consumers. In order to draw accurate conclusions about the depiction of American corporations within Wallace's work, wider research would have to be conducted that includes more of his pieces. Because only "Mister Squishy" was examined in this thesis, it is fair to say that within the context, American corporations are featured in a negative light. More context,

whether it be Wallace's works or other that of other writers, would provide a more accurate view of how these companies are displayed in American literature as a whole.

Through examination of the American dream, the collective versus the individual and marketing strategies and manipulation it has become evident that "Mister Squishy" is a piece of critique in regards to American companies. The resemblance to the practices that take place within the real world seems undeniable, and even though the criticism is not explicitly stated, it occurs clearly in "Mister Squishy" without Wallace bringing it to the center of the story.

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