

HISTORY GETS IN YOUR EYES

Mad Men, Misrecognition, and the Masculine Mystique

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Accompanying the meteoric rise in the popularity of *Mad Men* have been proliferating attempts to account for that affection. The explanations root the show's appeal in everything from its impeccable period stylings; to the exquisite entanglements of its gorgeous male and female leads; to postfeminist lust for a cad and vicarious pleasure in "casual vice"; to, in weightier fashion, its meticulous reconstruction and artful evocation of an era tantalizingly just beyond the reach of its target audience.¹ Viewers in their late twenties through forties learn, with varying focus on their parents' moment, about the agonies of the feminine mystique, the evolution of the consumer culture, and the national mood circa the Kennedy assassination. So enthralling has this quasi-documentary quality been that each installment sends pundits and fans scrambling to unpack the historical inspiration for particular plotlines and characters while scrutinizing each detail for its "truthiness." But perhaps the most interesting appraisal of *Mad Men*, enunciated by early critics, takes a dramatically contrary tack: to accuse the show of a lack of realism where it most counts, rendering it an exercise in generational sanctimony. By extension, the show becomes grist for a new round of history wars. These allegedly pit the virtuous, politically correct present against the sinful, benighted past and, summoning a tired *Kulturkampf*, the emancipated 1960s against the stolid 1950s.²

I propose to think about the show's relationship to history in a different way, defying its admirers and detractors both. Above all, I question that *Mad Man* adopts a fundamental stance of distance from the past such that it essentially offers either a skillful explication or facile put-down (or glamorization) of the epoch it depicts. Indeed, in my view the show is more plausibly the staging of a fantasy than the rendering of history.

Congenitally male and heterosexual, and offering ultimately futile escape from the burdens of conventional expectation, the fantasy remains painfully resonant and has present-day echoes, including in film and television. Ostensibly trained on the power of historical change, *Mad Men* actually testifies instead to the chronic quality of a postwar unhappiness that is little changed by being put in different settings. And far from presenting the 1960s as deliverance from the discontents of the 1950s, *Mad Men* implies that the 1960s failed before the 1960s even "happen." The show may therefore remain captive to the condition it diagnoses, equipping neither its characters nor — as yet — its viewers with the internal resources or genuine historical inspiration to find a way out. In this way, *Mad Men*'s phantasmic "history" functions as a broad-ranging, deeply pessimistic social critique. The show, I argue, does not entirely escape the question of history, but misses an opportunity to engage it more deeply.

When the curtain rises on *Mad Men*, we are treated to the sleek elegance of Madison Avenue in 1960, as well as an onslaught of vice. So inured may we become to the show's accretion of sins, which pile up like cigarettes in an ad man's ashtray, that it is worth recounting them to recoup the initial shock. In the inaugural episode ("Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," 1.1), our hero Don Draper puzzles over how best to shill for a tobacco industry whose product is becoming scientifically linked to mortal illness. For distraction or inspiration, he does an overnight with his beatnik mistress Midge, pulling from his desk the following morning a crisp shirt from a stack assembled to mask such evenings. Liquor, we learn, may be enjoyed after, during, or before a client meeting.

Pete Campbell, the punky junior executive, verbally undresses "the new girl," Peggy. The only reprimand from Don is that if he remains that obnoxious (not sexist), "no one will like" him, condemning him to stagnation on the company ladder. Campbell then decamps to a strip club for his bachelor party, where he deals a vile come-on to otherwise game single girls. Peggy's initiation as Don's secretary is handled by the office women, who instruct that she tart up her look. So advised, Peggy engages in a clumsy seduction of Don, rebuffed by his merciful recognition that she is not that kind of girl. Yet

later that evening, she quickly succumbs, sans protection, to the desire of a drunk Campbell desperately mopping up his waning bachelordom.

Though Don is more refined, he nonetheless upbraids a demanding Jewish female client by insisting, "I'm not going to let a woman talk to me like this!" (This, after he has joked with his boss about employment discrimination against Jews.) She, even so, seems already to want to sleep with him and consents to a flirt-and-make-up rendezvous that holds the door open for business mixed with pleasure. Don then returns to his beautiful wife, his sleeping children, and his suburban home having completely obliterated, all in two days' "work," whatever sanctity they nominally represent.

To all this turpitude—which subsequent episodes largely expound—some critics cried foul, noting a curious dissonance: that a show so attentive to historical detail so overplays the "WASP men behaving badly" aspect of the epoch it depicts. Advertising may well have been an especially bawdy corporate culture (as the vintage ad exec and *Mad Men* consultant Jerry Della Femina loudly boasts, but other veterans dispute).³ And the 1950s and early 1960s were never as chaste as the dominant morality expressed in the iconic depiction of middle-class American life, *Father Knows Best* (1954–60): they always included an admixture of Christian homeliness and chauvinistic prurience. Even so, the show so skews the balance as to exceed credulity. An oft-quoted quip in *Mad Men* commentary declares that the show "explains why the '60s," defined by the imperatives of feminism and civil rights, "had to happen."⁴ But it also leads us to wonder whether the 1960s—in their equally defining hedonism—would ever have happened if the 1950s had been so licentious.

As Mark Greif's oft-cited opening volley in the assault of the literati contends, *Mad Men* positions present-day viewers to "watch and know better with respect to male chauvinism, homophobia, anti-semitism, workplace harassment, housewives' depression, nutrition and smoking," thus proffering "an unearned pride in our supposed superiority." An essay in *Commentary* titled "The Television Show That Says You're Better Than Your Parents" similarly asserted that "*Mad Men* invites us to congratulate ourselves for having found solutions to every failure of the [past]" (Schulman, 46). For Benjamin Schwarz, the literary editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Mad Men* "encourages the condescension of posterity."⁵ But this elite take on the show has its own curiosities. It presumes to know, without asking viewers, precisely why they are so devoted. It thereby leaves itself near powerless to refute precisely the opposite claim: that the show's popularity lies in the titillating glimpse it offers into lives of dissolute danger, given the comparative

safety and productivity of our own. As speculation, moreover, the generational self-congratulation thesis is not terribly persuasive. One may indeed also covet, and not simply condemn, the “sinful” behavior of the Mad World. This identification potentially collapses the sense of historical distance in the audience that must underwrite generational conceit. I suspect, moreover, that the notion that the show plays up the smoking, drinking, and straying merely to denounce them could come only from someone who has never had a pack-a-day cigarette habit, too great a love of booze, or a professionally dangerous liaison.⁶

Watching *Mad Men*’s grand entrance, I had the sensation of being introduced to the inner workings of a well-oiled system of licensed transgression—a floating world of white, middle-class male desire in which vice is carefully built into the rituals of the workplace and broader grammar of its inhabitants’ lives. Secretaries dutifully protect their bosses from the intrusions of home. The office women themselves charge up the sexual currents. “Sorry honey, I have to work late tonight” somehow holds up as routine cover for affairs. And a clipped charm masks how crude so much of it is. As an added kick, the *Mad Men* are in a creative line of work, which eschews button-down rules and rewards a maverick nature.

If the setting is novel, the basic presentation is not. It has ample precedent in the Mob film. The characteristic gesture of this beloved American genre is to school the viewer in the mechanics of a subculture that dispenses with both the most sacred rules and the quotidian norms of “straight” society while imposing its own. Martin Scorsese’s *Goodfellas* (1990)—set in the same era as *Mad Men* and also meticulous in its period detail—provides a signal example. Like a didactic ethnographer, the narrator Henry Hill explains the varieties of theft, the many occasions for violence, the system of tribute, and the protocol for maintaining both wives and mistresses. Amid piles of cash and later cocaine, he extols the goodfellas’ contemptuous disregard of the “goody-two-shoes” existence of middle-class sops who play by the rules that crush them. Though tackier than the stylish *Mad Men*, wise-guys do a similar end run around the repressive 1950s.

The point of the Mob movie is not, of course, simply to snigger at how depraved the mobsters are. Rather, it is to induce both repulsion and attraction, summoning a disturbing insight. The ostensibly alien world of seeming sociopaths becomes a mirror to our own, such that “official” capitalism may also appear a system of ruthless predation, the police just another gang, and politics another syndicate. (The tobacco that the *Mad Men* are paid to push legally remains greatly more lethal than Mob violence or illicit drugs.) And

the mobsters' desire for money, power, and sex becomes an intensification of our own desires, which sustain the consumer culture. This dynamic suggests a way of reading *Mad Men* by which the construction of the Mad World and the Mob World, as realms of sanctioned indulgence at the boundary of prevailing norms, is essentially the same.

A last germane aspect of the Mob genre is the obsession with family and religion, evident in mobsters' perverse desire to see themselves as good husbands, fathers, and Catholics despite being cheats and murderers. This contradiction points to the dual nature of the fantasy, which seeks both the fulfillment of sociocultural norms and their violation. Hence the archetypal male version of "having it all" demands professional success, the sumptuous home, and the family, but also the netherworld of illicit pleasure.

The most recent icon of this triumph is, of course, Tony Soprano of *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007), perhaps the best-known New Jersey suburbanite of our day. Tony's life is thick with the stuff of macho dreams, from the office in a strip club, to the luxury SUV, the mandate for violence, and a sex appeal undiminished by an expanding waistline. (For some viewers the Soprano crew's racism and misogyny may be added bonuses.) But Tony also wants his wife to be content, his children well-adjusted Ivy Leaguers, and their futures taken care of. This is what "all of us" want, making his struggles resonant and the incongruity of his life acute. Swapping seduction for violence, Don Draper from Ossining, New York, presents a comparable embodiment of this duality. By this likeness, *Mad Men* would be the conceptual twin of the *Sopranos* even if *Mad Men*'s creator, Matthew Weiner, had not been an award-winning writer for the Mob drama.

But there is, alas, a flaw in this picture, no matter the version. Things don't end well for the goodfellas. They cannot contain their need for money and power and so violate their own code, whether by killing a "made man" or ratting out their friends. (Landing in the witness protection program, Henry Hill becomes precisely the "shnook" he once disdained.)⁷ Tony Soprano has anxiety attacks and need of a therapist. And Don Draper, along with most everybody in the Mad World, is miserable.

Early on, *Mad Men* gives us important clues as to the quality of Don's misery and its hold on the show. In some of the most arresting dialogue in the entire saga, Don in "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" says to his client Rachel Menken, "You're born alone, you die alone, and this world just drops a bunch of rules on top of you to make you forget those facts, but I never forget. I'm living like there is no tomorrow. Because there isn't one." Don combines nuclear-age nihilism with an oddly stoic "Be Here Now" spiritualism

of the coming 1960s. They are as close to a personal philosophy as he utters, referencing his rebel nature, the resignation at its core, and the tyranny of the “rules” he so resists.

Equally suggestive is Rachel’s reply: “I don’t think I realized it until this moment. But it must be hard to be a man, too. . . . I don’t know what it is you really believe, but I do know what it feels like to be out of place, to be disconnected, to see the whole world laid out in front of you the way other people live it. Something tells me you know it too.” By virtue of her insider/outsider status as a businessperson, a woman, and a Jew, she is able to appreciate his own outsidership (though without knowing its source). Chiefly, she intuits that Don has both the gift and the curse of reflexivity. This capacity to see the grooves of desire and habit in others makes him the kind of ad man who can perfectly match the right product to the right emotions. But it also leads him to believe that everything, including love and happiness, is artifice. Although season 2 finds him declaring that the essence of advertising is to make people “feel,” he himself can scarcely feel at all (“For Those Who Think Young,” 2.1). In a final irony, he is acutely perceptive about the inner life of others but has almost no insight into his own. The question that most troubles him recurs again and again: “Who is Don Draper?” (“Public Relations,” 4.1).⁸

Rachel’s lines about the burdens of manhood telegraph what will be a dominant theme across many episodes. The story lines concerning the women’s struggles are certainly better structured, more historically compelling, and more obviously gendered than those of the men. With admirable pathos, we are given portraits of the afflictions of suburban womanhood (Betty), the struggles of a professional pioneer (Peggy), and the ambivalence of a savvy “single girl” caught between competing ambitions (Joan).⁹ And yet the male angst—a masculine mystique our culture never tires of pondering—proves the stronger term. If there is any structural sexism to the show’s otherwise enlightened treatment of gender, it is that it demands we devote so much attention to—and feel protracted sympathy for—the trials of men blessed with nearly every form of privilege and success. All the while the women (if often privileged themselves) are *really* suffering.

With this focus, *Mad Men* joins a pageant of iconic representations of white masculinity in crisis and, specifically, the hazards of upper-middle-class mediocrity and ennui as experienced by men. This lineage includes Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt* (1922); the fiction of John Cheever, on which the show explicitly draws; the films *The Graduate* (1967, based on a novel from 1963), *American Beauty* (1999); and of course *The Sopranos*.¹⁰ The scenario of *Mad*

Men, however, also differs from most of these archetypes in making the spectacle of masculinity in crisis at once so elegant, alluring, and instructive.

George Babbitt trades bland conformity for adventure and excess, only to be disillusioned with them. *The Graduate*'s Benjamin Braddock seeks deliverance, instigated by the appearance of Mrs. Robinson's exquisite leg, from the descending cage of a career in plastics. But his is at best an ambivalent escape, as he scarcely loves his unexceptional bride and seems too unhinged to be happy. The bloodhounds of discontent will likely find his scent, trailing from his getaway bus and whatever life he builds. *American Beauty*'s Lester Burnham, an advertising executive, gives us a version of Ben had he succumbed to plastics. For the forty-three-year-old Lester, the rebellion comes too late. Covetous of his teenage daughter's hot friend, he plunges into adolescent regression ending with him slumped over his kitchen table in a puddle of blood.

A *Mad Man* like Don has it much better. Don does not have to choose between the domestic ideal and his suave debauchery—at least during the first three seasons. Up until his divorce in season 4, he gets to have both at the same time: the family life and the floating world, along with every age and variety of woman, including a stunning wife. Talented and charismatic, he is hardly some drab everyman. It is as though *Mad Men*'s creators have, as a thought experiment, stacked the deck in favor of male fulfillment. (Cut of the same cloth, HBO's *Big Love* [2006–11] imagines a man wed to three wives—each smart, attractive, pious, and lusty—to see how he copes.) The stakes are likewise raised: if the men cannot make a good go of it under *these* circumstances, then the flaws in what likely remains the dominant, aspirational ideal of American life—one essentially designed for (white) men—must run distressingly deep.

In this way, the show suggests ample grounds for worry. *Mad Men* repeatedly stages the twin implosion of the domestic ideal and its hedonistic alternative. Ideally, the latter should make the former bearable, while the former should give life substance and meaning to balance the indulgence. But the *Mad Men* continually experience disappointment with both the angel and the devil they struggle to separate. Even the fulfilled wish fails to satisfy. Chronicling that frustration, *Mad Men* is at its best.

An early episode, "Marriage of Figaro" (1.3), uses the device of the "ritual gone wrong," applied to the birthday party of Don and Betty's daughter, Sally, to savage the calm surface of postwar suburbia. Going back at least to Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and running through sitcom treatments

of weddings, funerals, and dinner parties, this device enables potent satires of social conventions and the vanity often at their core.¹¹ As with most things *Mad Men*, however, the work-up of the party is decidedly dark, and it ultimately indicts Don's life and character.

The evening prior to the birthday, Don's seduction of Rachel Menken temporarily aborts when she learns he is married. The following morning, he must play suburban patriarch and assemble as his daughter's gift a life-size playhouse in the backyard. He must, that is, erect a replica of a fake, insofar as the real Draper house is hardly the happy home it appears. With Rachel still in his thoughts, he stomachs the task only by getting quietly bombed on beer. The mingling at the party is likewise repellant to him. The men tell crass jokes, softly leer at the women, and congratulate each other on their success. "We got it all, Don," one neighbor boasts. "Yup, this is it," Don replies. A pretty divorcée deflects the obvious advance of a married man preying on her supposed vulnerability with the offer to throw a ball around with her son. When making a home movie of the party, Don catches a glimpse of a kiss between cheating neighbors. And, alerted by her girlfriend Francine, Betty runs interference when Don and the divorcée begin to chat, dispatching him to the bakery to fetch the cake.

Don's filming of the scene, with the TV viewer looking through the camera's lens, typifies his detached perception. What he observes — the totality of the party and the kiss especially, given his own perfidy — stirs in him both disgust and shame. More visceral than self-aware, his reaction suggests that he feels himself at once too good for, and not worthy of, his storybook life. Doubly unable to face the ceremony of the birthday cake, he drives in his car for hours, even stopping at a railroad crossing, the show faintly suggests, to contemplate suicide.¹² He returns home with the gift to Sally of a dog. Betty, who had been quietly seething, is left stupefied.

In the same season, Pete Campbell, installed in a Manhattan apartment with his new, wealthy bride, offers a portrait of male panic before the full pressures of family have even set in. Shortly after his wedding, he returns to the department store bridal registry a hideous, duplicate chip-and-dip — an emblem of the banality of postwar domesticity ("Red in the Face," 1.7). Made insecure by a chance encounter with a dashing acquaintance, he hits on the department store girl. Rebuffed, he exchanges the chip-and-dip for a .22-caliber rifle. Back at the office, he scopes the office women through the gun sight in a fantasy of sexual possession and annihilation — an explicit linking of sex and violence, and a wish that the women disappear. Later at home, his wife curses his "stupid toy," clearly a salve for his beleaguered manhood.

Pete later confesses to Peggy, with whom he has had sex earlier in the day, a bizarre fantasy of hunting and skinning a deer. In the fantasy, his “woman,” reduced to some frontier concubine in a secluded cabin, cooks and serves it to him. This profoundly regressive desire, which seeks escape from gendered modernity altogether, conveys postwar manhood gone haywire (though Peggy herself finds the imagery powerfully erotic, if also disturbing). The needle on its compass does not even know where to point.

What *Mad Men* repeatedly shows is its characters’ maladaptation to prescribed roles. Even when those roles are altered by the bending or breaking of rules, the disaffection persists, and weariness sets in. The questions of what they need multiply: Different roles? Rules more rigid or flexible? Better selves? Then too, for all its attention to social roles and cultural forms, *Mad Men*’s sharpest focus is on the particularities of character. And though the characters may be archetypes, they are never merely so.¹³ The show’s biggest meanings derive from how the characters handle their special predicaments and pathologies.

The central predicament is, of course, Don’s life, which is not sustainable as he lives it. It has the quality of a spiral pushed downward by mounting threats: the appearance of his brother and questions about his past; his increasingly brazen affairs, which push beyond even the allowances of the floating world; and Betty’s growing awareness of her unhappiness and distrust of him. In the third season he tries and fails to please a major client, the hotel mogul Conrad “Connie” Hilton. He is, in short, not just a cheat on the verge of being definitively found out but also a man with profound afflictions on the verge of cracking up. The question of whether and how he can save himself provides both the show’s signal tension and, in a roundabout way, its most important means of addressing culture and history.

As a psychological study, Don is fairly transparent and certainly tragic. He is haunted, we learn, by an intuition of the memory of his own birth. His prostitute mother had warned a john that if she got into “trouble” she would “cut [his] dick off and boil it in hog fat” (“Out of Town,” 3.1). (Don’s “memory” is triggered by the boiling over of milk he prepares for the pregnant Betty, as he tries to mend ways with her.) “Trouble” comes in the form of an unwanted pregnancy and a fatal childbirth. As she dies, she repeats the foul curse. The confused nursemaids name the child Dick to honor her apparent wish. Don is thus born under the sign of castration, his phallic power swallowed up in the grave of his ignominious mother. This lack is compounded by his biological father’s early death and his stepfather’s disapproval and physical abuse of him.

Reinvented during the Korean War, Dick takes the name of his dead commanding officer and becomes Don, suggestive of Don Juan—the great seducer of cross-cultural legend. He first uses his new name in civilian life to answer the seductive query of a bombshell broad on a train, eager to comfort a handsome, returning soldier (“Nixon vs. Kennedy,” 1.12). Thereafter, Don wields his “dick” as power in serial compensation for his phallic loss and chronic unhappiness. Even to his wife, his lovemaking has the aura of conquest—a ritual they literally stage when in Rome (“Souvenir,” 3.8). Midge asks Don to “save me and leave me for dead” (“5G,” 1.5). Tied up to the bed frame, Bobbie Barrett craves “the full Don Draper treatment” (“Maiden-form,” 2.6). Sex for Don plainly tends toward violence. Wrapping up a conversation about business rather than sex, Don tells his junior colleagues, “You’ll realize in your private life that at a certain point seduction is over and force is being requested” (“The Hobo Code,” 1.8). Applied directly to sex, this is a potent line. Ostensibly empowering, sex for Don can be merely the fulfillment of a demand by others that he perform his masculinity, sometimes aggressively so. Even in business, he meets a version of this in the punishing expectations of Connie Hilton, clearly a father figure, whom he also disappoints.

The more insistent demand, however, is internal. Shattered by childhood neglect and abuse, his adult esteem structure calls on sex for repair. But with the underlying trauma left unaddressed, this psychic mechanism surely fails. His affairs, and their often joyless sex, are partly based on a repetition compulsion, giving an edge of despair to his suave maneuverings and bedroom prowess, and they culminate in the even tawdrier one-night stands depicted in season 4 and his impulsive proposal of marriage to his secretary Megan.¹⁴

It is Don, and not Betty, who most needs the therapist’s couch, chiefly for treatment of what we would today diagnose as a “sex addiction.” (Don is thus an ideal figure for the age of Tiger Woods, in whom the willingness to risk it all while “having it all” reached absurd proportions.)¹⁵ Not by accident does Midge confess pleasure at being Don’s “medicine” (“5G”). But such therapy is neither a clinical nor a cultural option for the men of his time. It is likewise incongruous with Don’s lack of introspection and “strong, silent type” persona—the very persona, famously possessed by the film star Gary Cooper, to which the emotionally sloppy Tony Soprano vainly aspires. And no one quite wants a prudish Don, chastened by psychoanalysis. Emotionally isolated and bereft of a therapeutic language, Don must make his way alone.¹⁶ *Mad Men* wisely transcends narrow considerations of psychology, freighting Don’s journey instead with existential and even ethical significance. The quest for “wellness” is necessarily a quest for “meaning.”

The elemental question of Don's journey is whether he is capable of genuine transformation. We have reason to doubt it, with big implications for how we see the show. Whenever he is cornered, Don's instinct is to scoop up the woman du jour and escape, which is something far different from change. When Pete outs his past as Dick Whitman, a distraught Don rushes to Rachel Menken with the plea that they run away and "start over, like Adam and Eve." She wisely asks what will become of his children and calls him a "coward," ending their affair ("Nixon vs. Kennedy").

The discovery of a subsequent affair with Bobbie Barrett in season 2 causes Betty's anger, which has simmered through years of suspicion, to boil over. She bounces Don from his house. A trip Don then takes to California brings the prospect of renewal. After a cathartic reunion with the wife of the original Don Draper, complete with his drawing a "resurrection" tarot card, Don drifts into the ocean waves. The scene initially appears to depict an image of existential man at infinity's edge—an organic complement to his artful free fall through skyscrapers in the opening credits. Yet it soon seems a baptism, coded by the "old time religion" track that wades in during the credits ("The Mountain King," 2.12).¹⁷ He returns east with the promise of having been cleansed, reborn. Essentially confessing his indiscretions, he begs his way back into his home.

Yet Don's inaugural act of the following season is a one-night stand with a dippy stewardess ("Out of Town"). (The metaphor of the ocean tide as repetition wins out.) When his daughter finds the stewardess's airline pin, which Don accidentally brought home, he passes it off as a memento for her from his trip. Sleazy even by his low standards, this gesture exacerbates his daughter's episodes-long freak-out. She becomes pure symptom, unselfconsciously registering the corruption that has made her father and the Draper household toxic.¹⁸ Further buds of possible regeneration are quickly cut down. Watching the springtime rite of a maypole dance at his daughter's school, Don mainly covets the nubile teacher, who leads the feeble recital like a wood nymph ("Love among the Ruins," 3.2). "Renewal" for Don is merely the sexual possession of youth. He later shrugs off an offer of grace. While in the maternity ward awaiting his third child, Don meets an anxious, first-time father-to-be. The man, as if seeking redemption for unnamed sins, pledges to Don, "This is a fresh start. . . . I'm gonna be better. I'm gonna be a better man!" ("The Fog," 3.5). Finding neither lesson nor inspiration for his own life, Don eventually beds the teacher.

When Betty at last discovers the lie of Don's identity, dissolving their marriage, it only tops off a long legacy of deceit, humiliation, and outright

cruelty. Betty, perhaps, would have tolerated Don's failure to be truthful about his past had he only been faithful to her.¹⁹ And with the home wrecked, the floating world — always conjoined to the domestic ideal as its constitutive outside — dissipates too. Don is left the ungainly bachelor we find at the beginning of season 4.

Through the show's arc, Don's greatest need is for moral redemption; the question "who is Don Draper?" remains grounded in the question of whether Don Draper — whoever he is — is a good man. He in fact has periodic flashes of concern with his moral state. The most powerful comes via a childhood memory of a charismatic wayfarer visiting his home during the Depression. Cheated out of pay by Don's stepfather, the man marks the house with the hobo code signifying that "a dishonest man lives here" ("The Hobo Code"). From the stranger, who had willfully abandoned the comforts of job and family for the "freedom" of itinerant poverty, the young Dick gets an early image of escape. But he also witnesses a damning judgment that will one day apply to his own home. Freedom hits its self-extinguishing limit in the illusory quality of his escape from repetition: for all his efforts to renounce his stepfather and overcome his origins as a "whore child," he too is a dishonest man. Intuiting this, he nonetheless lacks the insight, courage, and tools to do anything about it. Just before his "baptism," he insists, "People don't change" ("The Mountain King"). Indeed.

There is a sense, pegged perfectly to the times, in which the psychological imperative of self-awareness and the moral imperative of self-reckoning combine. This links the two sides of the Don Draper puzzle and again elevates the show above a mere character study. After the war, the great Protestant theologian Paul Tillich labored in his adoptive American home to make Christianity relevant for the "Age of Anxiety," in which concern for the self was displacing concern for the soul. So resonant was Tillich's blend of theology, existentialism, and depth psychology that *Time* put him on a cover in 1959 (fig. 13.1). Tillich sought to recast and update the meaning of core Christian concepts (while being, we would later learn from his wife, a hopeless cheat).²⁰ Among them was sin, which Tillich defined by its etymological root as separation or estrangement: separation from God but also, crucially, from self in both its glory and its torments.²¹ The cover image itself is evocative of Tillich's provocative "theology." Tillich presents salvation as the acceptance — and not casting out — of all that is unholy in oneself. The portrait is in mottled pastel, appearing less an image of the man than a double of him, peering as if from, or into, a mirror. Behind Tillich's head shoots a cross in shadows, which also rises behind a small skeleton, or death's head,



FIGURE 13.1. Paul Tillich on the cover of *Time* (1959).

atop a shelf. Here we see represented not the dichotomous nature of “man” as “saint and sinner” but rather the struggle to come to terms with the death drive, which may take introjected pleasure to self-annihilating extremes. Literally doubled via his assumed identity, and ever fearful of having his tenuous rebirth shattered, Don can get right with the world only by confronting his estrangement from himself. The personal, at the very least, is the spiritual.

Mad Men takes on an impressive, if also bewildering, variety of identities. It is a male fantasy; a Don Juan tale; a possible redemption narrative; a sprawling history lesson; a feminist polemic; and a meditation on the masculine mystique billowing to a broader reflection on modern discontent. The analytic challenge is to see both this variety and how it may constellate into a legible pattern of meanings, situated in the proper galaxy of cultural reference points.

Such vision has proved elusive. History, fetishized by both the show and its audience, seems to have gotten in our eyes, yielding distorted views of *Mad Men* as being fundamentally about the past—about history and our relationship to it. This misrecognition holds whether the show is thought to covet past glamour or to condemn past recklessness. Retracing the hazy refractions of both views helps to highlight the statement I think the show makes and, ultimately, the failure it risks by not taking history seriously enough.

Katie Roiphe, extrapolating far too much from the racy milieu of her literary mother, reads *Mad Men* as a virtual documentary of the Way We Lived, and the Fun We Had, in which boardroom, barroom, and bedroom were scarcely distinguishable. For her, the show bids us to welcome “some vividness, some wild pleasure” and “just a little of the madness” into our own lives (“On ‘Mad Men’”). While right about the seduction of appearances, such a view seems blind to the ruin that accompanies the “fun,” as the show amply depicts, and both the cultural function and Faustian quality of the floating world. (Don, after all, is likened to Oscar Wilde’s Dorian Gray in the premiere of season 4.) It projects, perhaps on the basis of a personal wistfulness for a lost youth, a collective longing for some golden, historical age of allegedly guiltless pleasure. In a society in which alcoholism, drug addiction (including to nicotine), infidelity, divorce, and depression still run rampant, why assume that the typical viewer of *Mad Men* is guilty only of tepid transgressions, and yearns for vicarious snatches of ill-health and chaos?

The opposite view of the show as an incitement to self-congratulation traffics in the same premise that *Mad Men* constructs our world and the Mad World as essentially different. On this basis, it dubiously asserts that both *Mad Men* and its audience presume that we have overcome the past and “found solutions” to each of its failures. But perhaps above all, *Mad Men* screams that we have not found a solution to the happiness problem (at least among an influential slice of American life), no matter the advent of the 1960s and their enlightening sensitivities. If we had, why would our culture continually stage the saga of upper-middle-class discontent, with *Mad*

Men itself emerging as the latest, captivating edition? The 1960s, put otherwise, did not make Lester Burnham or Tony Soprano or even Don Draper — whether in fact or in the imagination — impossible or obsolete.

Far from being an object of distant scorn or longing, the show may well offer a despairing portrait of postwar American life in a permanent twilight, with happiness eluding even those who embody a ubiquitous, social ideal. Don's personal resistance to change, by extension, mirrors that of the broader culture. Despite its very conscious construction as a brand and frequent celebration of the "art" of advertising, the show may ultimately force speculation that the very consumer culture its characters so skillfully guide is somehow responsible for the condition of misery it dissects.

It is, of course, too early to say what the show's final message will be, or whether it will even have one. The fate of Tony Soprano, as Don Draper's unlikely double, is instructive with respect to both *Mad Men's* possible trajectory and its likely limitations. Even more so than Don, Tony is on a quest, in which he seeks a code or system of meaning by which to live. He looks to his family, Catholicism, his Mob family, his profession (such as it is), its pleasures, and even to psychotherapy. But his wife and children demand too much of him. He is far too sinful for religion. His Mob family will betray him in a heartbeat, proving the lie of the Mafia code. Power, money, and sex do not ultimately satisfy him. His therapist, finally, comes to suspect that he is a true sociopath, incorrigibly resistant to any cure.

The controversial final episode punctuates Tony's failure. Leaving us with the image of a jittery Soprano family having a public dinner, the *Sopranos* creator David Chase was excoriated for denying both narrative closure and satisfying drama. A massive constituency wished for Tony to be whacked. Yet Chase, by my reading, realized that the far greater, and more appropriate, punishment for Tony was to live on *essentially unchanged*, his family reattached to him like parasites to a host.

Those attachments begin to fill in the grim picture. Tony's high-achieving daughter, once on a do-gooder path, is now poised to become consigliere to the Soprano crime family. His layabout son had had a fit of conscience, growing troubled by such things as the "war on terror." That spell quickly passed, and he is handed a nightclub by his father. Tony's wife, Carmela, worried for her troubled marriage, at one point sought a therapist's counsel. The analyst, an elderly Jewish man, was more concerned with her troubled soul. He instructed her to rid herself of her murderous husband and every penny of his blood money. But Carmela, as Tony knows, is hardly satisfied with a Hyundai and a keepsake locket. Refusing her moment of grace, she sticks

with Tony. The picture is complete with Tony left to stew in his depravity, unresolved Oedipal conflicts, and anger issues, forever fearful of being killed by friends and rivals alike. By this conclusion, the entire show appears an indictment of greed and small-mindedness, the hollowness and even constitutive corruption of the American Dream.

The stakes are much lower for Don and the Mad Men. A cheating heart is not a loaded gun, and even tobacco wealth is not quite what we think of as blood money (though one could make the case, as Don himself nearly does in season 4). Should the Mad Men remain substantially unchanged, a hell both gentler and more stylish awaits them; the corresponding “statement” made by the show would largely affirm that of Chase’s masterpiece. But the Soprano parable is perhaps most valuable to the Mad Men as a lesson in how to avoid such a fate.

The suffering of the Soprano clan is rooted, at bottom, in the failure of the moral imagination and of empathetic engagement—in their obsessive self-focus, vanity, materialism, and ambition. The characters each face a potentially liberating call to conscience that would take them beyond themselves and their wants, but turn away. This myopia, I would argue, is the core affliction of Don and the others. As a group, they are painfully bereft of political curiosity, and scarcely have a conversation of genuine intellectual or moral substance (however much they philosophize at client pitches). Their reaction to the Kennedy assassination is wholly visceral, and the entire event mostly intensifies their personal sense of struggle. The narrowness extends to their private lives. Don cannot properly ask what it means to be a good man, and remains captive to his trauma. Betty, once circling the idea that her malaise has something to do with gender norms, appears ready simply to replace a fallen provider (Don) with a more upstanding one (Henry Francis). Pete is too self-involved and internally conflicted to muster any genuine sympathy for his infertile wife, with her imperiled dream of a family. And Peggy, for all her proto-feminist determination, can scarcely face the reality that she has had a baby. Indeed, the Mad World is almost entirely devoid of ethical conduct, defined by altruism and moral awareness. Instead, the characters mostly serve as accomplices to each other’s deceptions.²² Even if they grow likeable, they are never admirable.

The great irony and provocation is that the show occurs at the outset of the 1960s, an epoch defined by the massive incitement of the moral imagination. To great effect, individuals and groups sought to dismantle structures of oppression; newly saw their “unhappiness” as a consequence of power-laden norms; and sought “authenticity” and personal fulfillment through

commitment to causes and destinies greater than themselves. The show is widely praised for its brilliance in depicting a world quivering at the threshold of this great change. But it may also be, I think, faulted for overplaying its characters' stubborn resistance to change already under way, and remaining trapped in the Mad World it creates.

Conventional wisdom holds that everything "un-1960s" about the show — especially the characters' attitudes toward gender and race — is an implicit argument in favor of the 1960s, as defined by its iconic struggles and storied transformations. This wisdom comes too quickly. Writing in the conservative *National Review*, Natasha Simons takes a refreshingly different stance. She divines a political divide in the show's audience, with liberals naturally welcoming the approach of the iconic 1960s and conservatives lamenting it.²³ But to her, the 1960s connote primarily the intensification of narrow self-seeking and hedonistic pleasure fully compatible with an increasingly gluttonous consumer culture. This view suggests that the indiscretions of the Mad World are an anticipation of further cultural degeneration, not something the 1960s will undo. Without condemning the decade so broadly, we can nonetheless imagine the compulsive adultery of Don Draper et al. morphing some years later into wife swapping and key parties, with whatever added damage to the children. A similar continuum could link the Mad Men's drinking and the worst of the drug culture. Rather than stumping for the 1960s, the show may cleverly sound a note of caution.

My concern is with what the show says about the 1960s through its more direct representations of the era's famous archetypes and signal causes. Though few seem to have noticed, *Mad Men's* depiction of this "familiar" 1960s is ham-fisted and largely negative. Don mostly wins his verbal jousts with the insufferably earnest beatniks. In an entirely implausible scenario, Paul Kinsey, the office's faux-bohemian, goes south on something approximating a Freedom Ride mostly to impress his African American girlfriend. (Far from shallow and self-aggrandizing, the first actual Freedom Riders faced firebombs and near-lethal beatings.) Badly mangling the real history, the show matches its characters' insensitivity to the civil rights struggle with its own.²⁴ The young hitchhiker Don picks up is no principled draft resister but instead a thrill-seeking thug, who clubs and robs him ("Guy Walks into an Advertising Agency," 3.6).²⁵

In her drug-induced "twilight sleep" just before giving birth, Betty has a vision of her deceased father as an orderly mopping blood ("The Fog"). In a questionable coupling, his image evokes that of Chief Broom — the gentle Native American giant crushed by the asylum and larger forces of the Com-

bine in Ken Kesey's counterculture classic *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962). In the same sequence, Betty's mother tends to a bloody Medgar Evers (recently killed in the chronology of the show) while explaining to Betty, "You see what happens to people who speak up? Be happy with what you have." Associating the stifling self-censorship of overbred WASPs in suburban comfort with the silencing of Evers by murder, *Mad Men* strikes a troubling note.

Finally, we see Don, while scheming to bed the sexy teacher, reacting differently to a radio report—replete with excerpts of Dr. King's oration—on the famous March on Washington a day earlier. Worse, he interprets her interest in the story as a sign that she is some otherworldly idealist—as if literate, northern whites like Don could by late 1963 have no clue about or rooting interest in the civil rights movement.²⁶

Mad Men has been accused of being too favorable to the 1960s as a way of congratulating the present and the post-1960s generations. But the problem may be just the opposite: that, fearful of indulging 1960s sanctimony, the show makes its leading characters' detachment and cynicism its own. Far from being congratulated, younger viewers are given an oddly dispiriting history lesson.

Part of the innovation of *Mad Men* is that it portrays a milieu in the early part of the 1960s that departs from the familiar representations of rebellion commonly associated with the latter part of the decade. As the show moves forward in time, no one wants to see Pete Campbell become an anti-war leader, condemning the weapons industry for which he once shilled; or Joan Holloway as a women's libber, reconnected with the lesbian admirer who briefly appeared in the show's first season; or Don as a Werner Erhardesque guru of self-actualization.²⁷ To remain a success, the show must remain true to its characters, whom the changing times may just as well pass by as sweep up.

But it would be nice, for our sake, if not theirs, if they would sometimes question their circumstances, assumptions, and habits. The ad executives could at least reflect on how even creative work, done in maverick fashion, can fuel the engines of war, the profits of disease merchants, and a pervasive discontent born partly of consumer striving. The office women might quell their compulsive advice about how to make it in a "man's world" long enough to realize that, aided by an incipient sisterhood, they can make the world too. And Don might revisit his core beliefs, such as that "love" is merely a mirage "invented by guys like [him] to sell nylons" ("Smoke Gets in Your Eyes"). The whole of the 1960s, understood a certain way, sought

to disprove that jaded view. There remained the romantic love still enjoyed by its many true believers, but also the spiritual, world-changing kind proclaimed by Martin Luther King Jr. and sung by a whole generation. Above all, Don might come off the arch-conviction at the bottom of his nihilism that “people don’t change.” They of course do, along with whole cultures and societies.

But to change is harder than to stay the same. And change does not occur once, fixing everything for all time, but must constantly be renewed. The 1960s are important in this context less for their specific struggles and accomplishments than for their moral imagination and impulse for change, shared by young people especially. (Indeed, less than a year after *Mad Men*’s fourth season ended, the youth-driven Occupy Wall Street movement erupted; its idealism may appear a rebuke of the cynical ethos of the show, exposing how out of joint it is with at least the longings of the present.) Ingeniously set in a world of change, *Mad Men* might also do well to educate us with examples, useful for addressing our own times in both their regressions and their unique failures, of that impulse.

Failing such inspiration, whatever its source, we risk shrinking from the challenges of our time and staying the same, such that Don Draper, after all, is us.

NOTES

1. Many of these are skillfully articulated in Goodlad, “Why We Love.” The focus on “casual vice” comes from Roiphe, “On ‘Mad Men.’” Perhaps the most inventive of the many historical appreciations is *The Footnotes of Mad Men*, first presented by Natasha Vargas-Cooper in a blog on *The Awl* (<http://www.theawl.com/tag/footnotes-of-mad-men>). Vargas-Cooper does an impressive work-up of each episode, unpacking the historical references and contexts while inviting her readers to embellish and extend her own insights—as well as check the show’s “accuracy.” In so doing, she re-expands a context that the show compresses, introducing a new network of associations and paratexts. The blog served as the inspiration for her book *Mad Men Unbuttoned*, which reprises to some extent Jesse McLean’s prior effort in *Kings of Madison Avenue*. As the introduction to the present volume also notes, the *New York Times* has printed several stories highlighting *Mad Men*’s engagement of history and illuminating its backstories (e.g., Egner; Maynard; *New York Times*, “Mad Men City”). The high praise this historical drama has received for these references is itself conspicuous, likely reflecting poor historical literacy and consciousness in contemporary America.

2. For the *National Review*’s conservative take on the show, see Simons.

3. Femina's testimony, dripping with braggadocio and possibly embellishment, is recorded in Dean; Roiphe, "Real Mad Man"; *USA Today*. An ad man confirms the extent of the smoking, but denies that of the drinking (in his firm at least), in *New York Times*, "Plenty of Smoke."

4. Originally appearing in the *New York Times*, the quote is repeated in Simons.

5. Testifying to its influence, one columnist called Schwarz's essay "the best piece yet written on *Mad Men*" (Schiffren).

6. Greif at least acknowledges that the show mixes "Now We Know Better" with dollops of "Doesn't That Look Good." But this, for him, dooms it to a mixed message and bad faith. I would argue that the very tension between official censure and illicit desire propels many of the show's richer meanings, which little concern a supposed hierarchy of eras and go way beyond vicarious thrills.

7. As an added twist, the closing credits reveal that Henry Hill, in real life, was convicted of narcotics distribution while in the witness protection program.

8. Don's estranged brother asks the question in "5G" (1.5), and it also opens season 4.

9. For this *Mad Men* focus, I cannot help but feel grateful on behalf of my late mother. Like so many women of her time, she was limited by convention. Equipped with a titanic intelligence and, by 1960, an Ivy League postgraduate degree, she first worked to support her husband and then shelved any effort at a career for two decades to tend to family and home. She later became a political activist and part of local government.

10. I am careful to stress here the class quality of this genre. There are, of course, other narratives, many less bleak, of American family life. One popular for decades on TV chronicles the lower-middle-/upper-working-class family drawing on pluck, love, and a basic optimism to get by: for example, *The Honeymooners*, *All in the Family*, *Roseanne*, *Married with Children*, *The King of Queens*, and even *The Simpsons*. Such shows suggest that the relative absence of wealth, ubiquitously coveted in our society, increases the chance of genuine happiness. Other programs, such as *Six Feet Under*, depict families outside of heteronormative boundaries or, like *Friends*, recast the family so as to include coworkers and friends.

11. On representations of the "ritual gone wrong" and their carnivalesque qualities, see LaCapra, *Madame Bovary*, 203–5.

12. In this subtle scene Don's suicidal thoughts are telegraphed through his anguished expression as the train approaches and then passes. The prior episode sets up the moment: when Paul Kinsey explains his tardiness with "Act of God, sorry, someone threw themselves in front of a train," Don responds, "Ah, suicide" ("Ladies Room," 1.2).

13. Rather unfairly, Greif reads the show as little more than an assemblage of stock characters, such as the "Old Mentor," "Stifled Wife," "Assertive Woman," and "Bohemian Artist." Alessandra Stanley, by contrast, argues that the characters possess an "elusive weirdness" that saves them from this fate.

14. This broadly Freudian work-up of Don draws on LaCapra's understanding of trauma, presented, among other places, in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* and *History and Memory after Auschwitz*. Key to trauma theory is the idea that mourning entails a working through of loss through which loss is acknowledged and incorporated into one's subjectivity. In a revealing line, Don tells Betty, who still thinks about her late mother, that "mourning is just extended self-pity" ("Babylon," 1.6). This macho attitude reinforces the sense that Don has never confronted his psychic pain and its source, and is thus trapped in a condition akin to melancholy, defined by the repetition compulsion.

15. The revelations of Woods's womanizing came in 2009, long after *Mad Men*'s debut. Dwarfing Don in fame and fortune, Woods nonetheless shares with Don the squandered treasure of the beautiful, Nordic wife and two children.

16. Don's season 4 relationship with Faye Miller opens the possibility for a more self-knowing Don; but true to the character's fundamental isolation, he does not make it last.

17. The song begins, "I say Christian pilgrim / soul redeemed from sin / called out of darkness / a new life to begin."

18. Sally's conspicuous upset at the death of her grandfather likely reflects her displaced awareness that her own father is already lost to the family—if he was ever quite there.

19. This speculation about Betty has, I think, ample support. At one point she says outright to her therapist, "I can't help but think that I'd be happy if my husband was faithful to me" ("The Wheel," 1.13). With the passionate lines "I want you so badly," she confesses in an earlier episode an intense craving for Don ("Babylon"). That craving, I would argue, is sexual but also seeks a more total possession of him. I think she appreciates, moreover, his specialness, and even considers his mysteriousness—to a point—part of his allure. When he comes fully clean with her, she does seem to disdain his lowly social origin. But here I think she reverts to the biases of her elevated class partly as a defense mechanism against her feelings of hurt.

20. Hannah Tillich recounts Paul's infidelities and her eventual peace with them in *From Time to Time*.

21. Tillich develops the idea in many places, among them, "You Are Accepted" and *Systematic Theology*, 44–47.

22. Don does help Peggy while she is in a sanatorium after giving birth, essentially telling her to forget the entire episode. But with this advice, which aids her in moving on, he instructs her in the powers of a denial that has caused him great damage. And pledging to support his mistress's troubled brother, he mostly seeks to make up for his abandonment of his own brother. Such acts of virtue, in sum, are either compromised or self-serving.

23. While plausibly defining an ideal-typical liberal and conservative *position*, Simons in no sense demonstrates an actual split in audience reaction.

24. Schwarz points out that the show seems to confuse the Freedom Rides of 1961,

which sought enforcement of the integration of interstate business, with the voter registration work in Mississippi of some years later. Given the show's fanatical attention to detail, this blurring is inexcusable.

25. It is, moreover, extremely unlikely that such a man in the summer of 1963 — long before large-scale troop deployments to Vietnam and even before the conflict had attracted much media attention — would have had the foresight to avoid the draft so as not to go to Vietnam. I thank Michael S. Foley, an expert on the Vietnam-era draft, for pointing out this problem in the depiction of the character.

26. Interestingly, the most positive embodiment of the 1960s on the show is the young guitar-playing priest, who represents a twist on a traditional source of morality. Seemingly set to hit on Peggy, his true concern is for her conscience and her child. Without judgment, he encourages Peggy to address that part of her life and her own self-estrangement.

27. Werner Erhard was the founder of EST, a form of group therapy popular in the early 1970s. Born John Rosenberg, he reinvented himself as Erhard after the demise of his first marriage in the early 1960s.