“THE CATASTROPHE OF MY PERSONALITY”: “MAD MEN” AND THE CRISIS OF THE SEPARATE SELF

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ABSTRACT

Since its premiere in 2007, Matthew Weiner’s acclaimed television series Mad Men has left viewers postulating and critics raving: Who is Don Draper, where did he come from, and where is he going? On the surface, Don is a successful creative director at a New York advertising agency, a loving husband and father of three. Behind closed doors, though, Don is an adulterer with an impressive track record, an absentee father to his ex-wife’s children, and a recovering alcoholic with an unpredictable tendency to up-and-leave at any given moment. Time and time again, we see Don try to shake his former identity – as a Korean War deserter and the bastard son of an abusive farmer – in favor of chasing the American dream, but time and time again, he winds up right back where he started. This paper explores Mad Men’s conception of ‘identity’ as a process of rejection and acceptance, incorporating the show’s numerous literary references to discuss the trajectory of its characters’ various, yet similar journeys to self-discovery (The Inferno), its dealings with self-loathing (Portnoy’s Complaint) and alienation (Rosemary’s Baby), and its eventual embrace of the ‘othered’ self (Meditations in an Emergency). When a man walks into a room, he has a million reasons for being anywhere – just ask him. In this paper, not only do we ask, but we also listen to where he’s been and where he’s going.
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Now I am quietly waiting for
the catastrophe of my personality
to seem beautiful again,
and interesting, and modern.

The country is grey and
brown and white in trees,
snows and skies of laughter
always diminishing, less funny
not just darker, not just grey.

It may be the coldest day of
the year, what does he think of
that? I mean, what do I? And if I do,
perhaps I am myself again.

-- Frank O’Hara, from “Mayakovsky”
INTRODUCTION

Figure 1: Peter Campbell, Don Draper, Joan Harris, Bert Cooper and Roger Sterling stand on the second floor of Sterling Cooper’s new office space at the end of season 5. Photo courtesy of AMC, from season 5, episode 13, “The Phantom,” Mad Men (AMC, 2012)

“Who is Don Draper?”

Don looks up from where his gaze has fallen, having been watching the reporter sitting across the table from him scribbling in a notebook in an indecipherable shorthand. “Excuse me?” Glasses clink and silverware scrapes against china in the background. The reporter repeats himself. “Who is Don Draper?”
“What do men usually say when you ask that?”

The reporter shrugs. “Well, they usually take a moment to think about it and then they do something cute. One creative director said he was a lion tamer.”

Don smirks and puts out his cigarette as if to say he isn’t a man who does the usual thing. The reporter tries again.

“Knock-out wife, two kids, house in Westchester, you take the train – maybe you take your car now that you can afford it?”

“As I said before, I’m from the Midwest. We were taught that it’s not polite to talk about yourself.”

The scene cuts and with that, in typical Don Draper fashion, the interview is over. Later in the same episode (S4: E1, “Public Relations”), Don (Jon Hamm) will be berated by his colleagues for divulging too little (he isn’t even from the Midwest after all – he was born and raised in rural Pennsylvania); two seasons later, at the end of season 6, Don’s colleagues will sentence him to a leave of absence for divulging too much (see Chapter 2). Aside from his numerous affairs, addiction issues and unbecoming habit of going AWOL, nothing gets Don in more trouble than his own identity. Over the course of several seasons, we learn to take such probes into Don’s private life with a suspenseful inhale of dramatic irony, having come to understand that the question “Who is Don Draper?” is loaded beyond conventional standards; born Dick Whitman, Don was the bastard child of an abusive farmer, raised in a whorehouse by his father’s wife and an uncle after his father’s death. After leaving home, he joined the army where he assumed the name Don Draper when his lieutenant – the real Don Draper – was killed in an explosion.
Beautiful women want to marry him, ambitious coworkers want to steal his job, and ad execs from rival firms want to hire him; everyone wants a piece of Don Draper, but in the end, no one really knows him. “He could be Batman for all we know,” Harry Crane (Rich Sommer), Sterling Cooper’s head of television, jests in the season 3 episode “Marriage of Figaro” (S1: E3, “Marriage of Figaro”). According to Matthew Weiner, Mad Men’s creator, in an interview at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in 2015 with RogerEbert.com editor-in-chief and New York Magazine TV critic Matt Zoller Seitz, comparisons between Don Draper and various super heroes aren’t new, but then again, neither are the stories behind these heroes of western civilization; “[Don’s story] is the story of the twentieth century, and that’s what I was interested in. I have done everything I can to cast Don in what I believe is a hero,” Weiner said. “It’s either, ‘My parents are from another planet, those are not my parents,’ or, ‘When I take my glasses off, I can fly’” (Museum of Jewish Heritage, 2015). Don might not be able to literally fly like Superman, but he has developed a similar ability to fly under the radar as what Weiner calls a “hero of assimilation” (Museum of Jewish Heritage, 2015): a man who has figured out how to suppress the parts of himself that don’t quite fit the American model for happiness and success to become an assimilated member of society.

When Don slips into his grey flannel suit in the morning, he is no longer the same man who abandoned a life in the rural Midwest and deserted the army; when he kisses his wife and children goodbye before boarding a train into the city, he is no longer the man who spends afternoons and evenings holed up in various hotel rooms and apartments with his latest mistress; when he looks at the success he’s cultivated and the life he’s built, he is no longer the man he could once recognized looking back at him in the mirror. Don is more than the man in the grey flannel suit we see sitting at the head of a conference table and sipping on expensive cocktails at
swanky city bars. He is a displaced farm boy and a victim of abuse; he is an alienated war veteran trying to regain his footing as someone completely unfamiliar to himself.

In season 4, we get our first of very few direct glimpses into the private dialogue of Don’s internal musings when he narrates several of his journal entries during what is something of a time of personal renewal for him, fresh from a divorce and struggling to get his alcoholism under control:

“When a man walks into a room, he brings his whole life with him. He has a million reasons for being anywhere, just ask him. If you listen, he’ll tell you how he got there. How he forgot where he was going, and that he woke up. If you listen, he’ll tell you about the time he thought he was an angel or dreamt of being perfect. We’re flawed, because we want so much more. We’re ruined because we get these things, and wish for what we had.” (S4: E8, “The Summer Man”)

We see Don adapt from situation to situation depending on the people he’s with and the story he’s telling, but we are also dually aware that the Don Draper we see in any given scene is packing far more baggage than his slim briefcase lets on. Over the course of seven seasons, we have listened to his story, and watched as he has forgotten who he is and finally ascended to where he was going. What makes Don so fascinating isn’t that we know exactly why he does what he does, but because we must evaluate all his possible motivations to understand where he’s coming from.

In many ways, though, Mad Men is more than the story of Don Draper. It is the story of everyone like him, experiencing alienation in varying degrees for various reasons. There is the self we project as a sort of public persona, molded by cultural expectations to fit certain established ideals, and then there is the self that is something else entirely, an identity defined by
inherent forces we have no control over. When the self is split into an internal and separate external entity, the ability to identify with either entirely becomes nearly impossible; it’s easy to feel exiled by one’s own self when the person you identify with internally is incongruous with the external person the world expects you to be.

In this paper, we will go on both a literal and figurative journey, and it is one that begins where *Mad Men* and countless tales before it have begun: in the middle. When we first meet Don, he hasn’t yet realized his true self; he is no longer Dick Whitman, but he is still struggling to pin down his identity as Don Draper. Don is trying to build a new life, but in doing so, he has forgotten that every stable structure requires a foundation, just as every great story requires a beginning or backstory. Although Weiner’s show might start in medias res with characters bent on forgetting their humble beginnings, Weiner himself recognizes the value of a foundation and necessity of a beginning, littering the series with literal ‘backstories’ – physical copies of major literary works published during or before the time *Mad Men* takes place – to both further ground the show in its era and expand on its existing themes. In the season 6 premiere, we will encounter Don sitting on a beach in Hawaii paging through a copy of Dante’s *Inferno*, a story that also begins in the middle of a journey – life’s journey, that is. And in later seasons, books like Frank O’Hara’s *Meditations in an Emergency*, Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* and Ira Levin’s *Rosemary’s Baby*, along with many, many more (although these will be the main four we take a look at), will make brief appearances with major impact. Our identities are shaped by a multitude of external forces acting to influence our ideas and behaviors, and by including countless literary, film, and music references as a necessary part of the show, Weiner uses the power of pop-culture to both tell a larger story of human history and culture, and demonstrate how life imitates art just as the internal self adopts its external surroundings.
On the surface, *Mad Men* is a show about the surface; the sleek office interiors, on-trend outfits, and attractive actors and actresses are perhaps what the show is best known for in the mainstream media. But beneath all the glitz and the glamour, the sex and the drama that have made the show more of a brand than other shows like it, is the other side of *Mad Men*. On the surface of the show’s narrative, we see the characters doing an exceptional job of embodying the public personas their society values; it doesn’t necessarily come naturally to them, but they actively make the effort to get it right. Just beyond that, however, at the point where trying to fit in turns into a violent struggle against one’s own self, there is a deeper disconnect at play between what we see and what’s really going on below the surface. *Mad Men* is a story of exile and identification, of how the self can become an ‘other’ under the influence of external forces. It is both the story of a single man and an entire nation; it is the history of what separates us and, ultimately, brings us together. On this journey, we will go backwards and forwards – like a timemachine – until we have successfully merged where we’ve been with where we’re going; until we have found the sense of peace that comes with unifying the catastrophe of our personality with the forces acting against us.
Chapter 1

“A Twinge of the Heart”: Pain, Pleasure and the Powerful Pull of the Repressed Self

When the lights go down in the conference room and the whirring of a projector starts up in the background in the season 1 finale “The Wheel,” Don is, in a sense, alone. Seated around the conference table are his fellow executives at Sterling Cooper and two potential clients from Kodak, but as Don begins his pitch for a product that will become known as the Kodak “Carousel,” there is an eerie sense that he is no longer occupying the same space in the present; instead, he has been transported to the past:

“Technology is a glittering lure. But there is the rare occasion when the public can be engaged on a level beyond flash if they have a sentimental bond with the product. My
first job, I was in-house at a fur company with this old-pro copywriter, a Greek named Teddy. Teddy told me the most important idea in advertising is ‘new.’ It creates an itch. You simply put your product in there as a kind of calamine lotion. But he also talked about a deeper bond with the product. Nostalgia. It’s delicate, but potent. Teddy told me that in Greek, ‘nostalgia’ literally means ‘the pain from an old wound.’ It’s a twinge in your heart far more powerful than memory alone. This device isn’t a spaceship, it’s a time machine. It goes backwards, forwards, takes us to a place where we ache to go again. It’s not called the wheel. It’s called the carousel. It lets us travel the way a child travels. Round and around, and back home again, to a place we know we are loved” (S1: E11, “The Wheel”)

As Don flips through the pictures loaded onto the projector – photos of his children playing in the park, of him and his first wife Betty (January Jones) on their wedding day – he is held captive by his own presentation. Harry Crane even jumps out of his chair and leaves the room before the others can catch him tearing up in the aftermath. The pitch – the message, itself – is touching. It’s a part of ourselves we long to return to again and again, as if it were the first time. Flicking ash from the tip of his cigarette, Executive of Accounts Duck Philips (Mark Moses) casually addresses the men from Kodak, who are sitting dumbfounded in the dim lighting of the conference room, a reaction not all together unexpected after a homerun Don Draper presentation: “Good luck at your next meeting.”

When Don decided to take another man’s name and build a new life for himself, he didn’t do so lightly. Don’s past is plagued by the pain he experienced at the hands of his father (Archie Whitman) and stepmother who viciously abused him as a child, as well as the guilt associated with accidentally killing his commanding officer in the army and abandoning his family to start a
life on his own. “I have a life,” Don says in the season 1 episode “5G” (S1: E5, “5G”) when his brother Adam comes to visit him at the office unannounced, “and it only moves in one direction – forward.” What’s passed is in the past and Don hopes the future will put the necessary distance between who he was and who he wants to be. But because Don is so busy constantly reminding himself to forget, he is unable to wholly exist in the present – let alone the future – without falling back on a twisted sort of nostalgia. “Have you figured out a way to work the wheel into it?” one of the Kodak executives asks before Don begins his pitch. “We know it’s hard because wheels aren’t really seen as exciting technology, even though they are the original,” says the other. Don, however, isn’t interested in reinventing the wheel; he’s far more interested in recreating the past.

Just as Don wills his life to keep moving forward while simultaneously falling into the trap laid by his past, Mad Men itself engages in a romantic affair with the future (or at least the idea of one), but remains, in many ways, a tribute to the unshakable pull of nostalgia on the present. Set in the 1960s, the series follows a generation of men and women living in an America that’s ripe for change; viewers relive the low-points of the era – institutionalized racism, rampant sexism, riots in the streets, and even unregulated littering – but we are also exposed to its triumphs. In 1969 (or season 7 on the show), Neil Armstrong was the first man to walk on the moon, a feat many Americans once thought could only be done on the pages of a book or the big screen at the movies. And yet, there we all were (because Mad Men allows us to be included as part of the ‘we,’ even if we weren’t alive at the time), sitting in front of our televisions in living rooms across the country, watching a man do what man had never done before.

The lure of technology is certainly a captivating one, this much is true, and often as time moves forward – on the show and in life – we find ourselves looking for the next best thing to
propel us into the future like astronauts into space, only to forget the very necessary and ultimately inescapable history of where we’ve been. In this first section, we will follow Don into his past, the part of his identity he is both a slave to and desperate to gain control over, before moving on to discuss how Don copes with – or refuses to cope with – his powerlessness in the face of his ‘otherness.’ Just as Dante first had to descend into the belly of Hell before ascending to Paradise, Don must first descend into his own personal hell before finding the means to escape. The fiery flames of Don’s memories lick unceasingly at his present life, but as we’ll see, perhaps the lingering pain from old wounds – that twinge of the heart – is something Don seeks, not avoids.
“Midway in Our Life’s Journey”: Don’s Decent into Dante’s Hell

Figure 3: Don reads a paperback copy of Dante's Inferno in the season 6 premiere "The Doorway." (AMC, 2013)

Fast-forward five seasons beyond the “Carousel” pitch into Mad Men’s future – season 6, episode 1, “The Doorway” – and again, although a bikini-clad Megan Calvet (Jessica Paré), Don’s much-younger second wife, is sprawled in a beach chair beside him, Don doesn’t appear present in the same way everyone around him is. On assignment at a beach resort in Hawaii, Don is pictured paging through a copy of Dante’s Inferno, a book we later learn is a gift from his mistress of the moment, Sylvia. Over the sound of crashing waves, we hear Don’s voice reading the first lines of the poem: “Midway in our life’s journey, I went astray / from the straight road and woke to find myself / alone in a dark wood.” The Inferno, the first book of Dante Alighieri’s Divine Comedy, follows Dante on a journey of literally epic proportions through the nine subterranean circles of hell. Filled with allusions to famous figures both mythical and historical,
and references to the complex social and political infrastructure of Italian life at the time it was written, *The Inferno* is a masterpiece of classical literature – but not necessarily the best beach-read. *Mad Men* – and Don especially, as we’ll see – doesn’t shy away from more serious literary selections, but then again, what better place to start our journey than by questioning what a 14th century poem is doing on a beach in Hawaii on a show about advertising executives in the 1960s?

**Mid-Life Crisis or Existential Emergency?**

In an interview with Terry Gross for NPR’s *Fresh Air*, Matthew Weiner discusses his odd, yet poignant decision to open the sixth season with a reference to *The Inferno*: “[*The Inferno*] is really about a guy who is having a complex midlife crisis and the transformation involves becoming a new person.” Midway in his life’s journey – three kids, two wives, and countless mistresses later – Don has gone astray. The only question now, Weiner says, is whether he can find his way out of the dark wood. “He is brave in the face of death but more deeply, deeply afraid of it – and trying to find some purpose and some control over it – because he is aware of the sort of meaninglessness of life,” Weiner says. “As [Don’s] getting up there, he’s saying ‘Why do I keep repeating this? Why am I in this process?’ The situation he’s in is very much where he [could have been] … right before the pilot.” Don has tried time and time again to reinvent himself as Don Draper – loving husband, father and successful adman – but time and time again, those titles have come just within his reach before eluding him entirely. Weiner suggests that Don is aware his repeated attempts to change course don’t seem to be landing him
anywhere new, yet Don’s awareness doesn’t seem to faze his stubborn approach. That Don wants to separate himself from the man he used to be is clear, but how he plans to do it without changing up his technique leaves us – and Don – stumped.

We’re all familiar with the famous Albert Einstein quote, “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results,” but if there were ever an opportunity to apply this phrase in real life, it would be in a conversation about Don Draper. Are we suggesting that Don is insane? Yes, and no. Although the different schools of psychology that developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries played with the idea in varying degrees, all agreed that there’s just something about the past that has an undeniable effect on the present (and eventually, the trajectory of our future), a theory Sigmund Freud put his finger on in his landmark paper *Studies on Hysteria* when he observed “hysterics suffer mainly from reminisces” (Newman, 14). Don isn’t exactly the biggest fan of psychological theory – “Freud, you say? What agency is he with?” he asks facetiously in season 1 before dropping a folder of research on Freud’s ‘death wish’ into the trash (S1: E1, “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”) – but, ironically enough, he would be a textbook subject for any psych scholar.

Don wants to be someone new – he wants to reconcile the man he was in the past with the man he hopes to become in the future – but he’s letting the self he desperately wants to repress get the better of him. When Don gives his presentation to Kodak back in season 1, he presents the past as a calamine lotion capable of relieving the anxieties posed by the future, but when he tries to put this same theory into practice in his own life, he severely butchers his own definition of nostalgia. Don longs to return to a place where he was loved, but that place – that mythical childhood – is nothing more than a fantasy for him. Because Don’s past is one he wants to forget and replace with memories worthy of being eternalized in a Kodak moment, he repeats
the same transgressions again and again in the hopes of getting it right the next time. Don’s early life was plagued by neglect and emotional abuse, so he thinks that if he starts over with a new name and his own family, he can finally jettison a past with which he wants nothing to do. Old habits die hard though, and Don ends up bringing more pain into his own life and the lives that end up ruined in his wake; Don doesn’t want to be as promiscuous as his mother – a former prostitute – or as cruel as his father, and yet he ends up making a name for himself as a notorious adulterer and a workaholic with a drinking problem who is barely home enough for his children to really know him.

A (Re)Living Hell

Don’s actions seem to speak for themselves, and as viewers, we aren’t being conditioned to expect much from Don over the course of seven seasons. Whenever he tries to make some headway, he always seems to end up right back where he started; his past just won’t stay in the past. When Betty (Don’s ex-wife at this point) receives a visit from the Department of Defense on behalf of North American Aviation – a client SCDP has been courting since Don’s first mysterious disappearance in season 2 (S2: E11, “The Jet Set”) – Don is beside himself. After nearly two decades of hiding from the truth, Don is certain that, this time, the jig is finally up. “I’m tired of running,” Don relents when Faye Miller (Cara Buono), his love interest at the time and a research psychologist commissioned to do work for SCDP, confronts him after he has a violent panic attack from seeing two men dressed in generic suits standing in the hallways of his
apartment building. “In Korea I was wounded, but this other man was killed and they mixed us up. I wanted them to. And I just kept living as him. But now I think that’s over.”

This is the first time we see Don willingly reveal this information in order to turn over a new leaf with someone he’s close to, and in the final episode of the season (S4: E12, “Tomorrowland”), Don continues his honest streak when he unflinchingly brings his children to the home he once shared with Anna Draper – the real Don Draper’s wife – in California, and when he lays out his past before he proposes to his secretary Megan in the hopes that it won’t interfere with their future together. That Don cheats on Faye with Megan in these episodes is only the first in a series of transgressions to follow in future seasons hinting that Don’s ‘fresh start’ isn’t really all that different from the other fresh starts he’s attempted in the past.

Don probably wasn’t thinking about Dante’s hell when he originally made the “Carousel” pitch, but that doesn’t necessarily mean Weiner wasn’t; in *The Inferno*, sinners are outfitted with
a *contrapasso*, or punishment, that reflects their earthly sins in such a way that forces them to suffer eternally in the afterlife as they suffered in life – an unrelenting form of justice not altogether unlike Don’s twisted desire to relive “the pain from an old wound,” rather than soothe it. For example, the heretics – those who denied God and the belief in a life after death, are buried in tombs Dante describes as “cheeks of pain: / for, in a ring around each tomb, great fires / raised every wall to a red heat… The biers / stood with their lids upraised” (Alighieri, 9.114-118). In the middle ages, heretics were burned at the stake for their disavowal of God, however, it isn’t based on this earthly punishment that Dante places the heretics in fiery, open-mouthed tombs; fire occurs as a form of punishment in other parts of *The Inferno*, and plays an even more important role in the punishment of other sinners than in that of the heretics. The denial of immortality and the existence of the soul beyond burial in a churchyard is central to the sin of heresy, so it makes sense that in Dante’s hell the heretics find in the afterlife exactly what they expected to find in life: a soul that exists only in the form of a body buried in a coffin.

Dante portrays sin as a burden which man imposes knowingly on himself, and that burden is his refusal to accept God as the highest power and law. Punishment in *The Inferno* is not a rebirth after death, but rather a continuation of life, or refusal of relief; punishment lies less in bringing to light what the sinner has done wrong than in keeping the sinner in the dark, cut off from the glory of God’s love. Don repeats his mistakes because he can’t see beyond them; because he is working so hard to deny his past – the part of himself that would clue him into where he went wrong, or astray as Dante might say – he is denied the light of seeing how to fix his future. After reading *The Inferno*, will Don finally see the error of his ways and begin his ascent to “that shining Mount of Joy” (Aligheri, 1.75), the final stage of enlightenment and
godliness in the *Divine Comedy* where paradise resides? Or is he doomed to walk in the dark wood for all of eternity (or at least until the show’s final episode)?

### Scratching at the Self: *Looking for Power in Victimhood*

In season 2, Don and Peter Campbell (Vincent Kartheiser) go on a business trip to California to try to recruit clients for Sterling Cooper (S2: E12, “The Mountain King”). Not surprisingly, Don takes this as an opportunity to run away with a woman he meets at the hotel where he and Pete are staying, but after he’s done with that brief affair, Don decides to stay with Anna Draper for a few days at her house in California. Sitting together on the porch, Anna and Don begin discussing why Don ran away. “I ruined everything – my family, my wife, my kids,” Don says, shaking his head. “My brother came to find me, I told him to go away… I’ve told you things I’ve never told Betty. Why does it have to be that way?” What Don is really asking is, why does he have to hide who he was in order to be who he is? Why can’t his two identities coexist? Anna knows about his past and she still accepts him, but he knows the truth will destroy Betty and the life he’s made with her, so it’s better for him to go on denying a part of himself than it would be for him to try to be both at the same time. “I have been watching my life,” Don tells Anna. “It’s right there. I keep scratching at it, trying to get into it. I can’t.” Don knows he’s made mistakes, but no matter what he does to try to correct them, he always seems to end up a
victim; he feels more like a passive object in someone else’s life watching things happen to him, than the active subject of his own.

“I’m The Boss and I’m Ordering You”: Victimhood vs. Control

Don sees himself as two separate entities: the man he used to be and the man he pretends to be. The man he pretends to be – Don Draper – isn’t responsible for the havoc the man he used to be – Dick Whitman – wreaks. However, there is still a part of Don that identifies with Dick preventing him from taking responsibility for his life in the present and denying him the agency to make decisions that will allow him to move forward. In one of Friedrich Nietzsche’s essays from Untimely Meditations, titled “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” Nietzsche evaluates those living in the past in contrast to those who have a healthy awareness of the present and future. “Imagine the most extreme example, a person who did not possess the power of forgetting at all,” Nietzsche writes. “Such a person no longer believes in his own being, no longer believes in himself in this stream of becoming” (Nietzsche, 3). Don keeps making the same mistakes over and over because his present self doesn’t actually refer back to anything; it exists in a vacuum absent of Don’s past as Dick. Because Don is so focused on compartmentalizing his two opposing selves, he denies his present self the opportunity to live an authentic existence capable of making decisions and shouldering consequences.

Don cannot have done with his past, therefor he has no control over his future, leaving him with no choice but to stew in wait for his chance to try something new rather than repeating more of the same. In his writings, Nietzsche compares people like Don to dyspeptics, or people
who stew in their own juices because they “cannot ‘have done’ with anything.” Don watches as an outsider from the past while his present self – Don Draper – lives a life Dick Whitman could only dream of. Because Don perceives himself as a victim of his past and thus a passive participant in his present life, Don is left with no other option but to desperately grasp at whatever means of control are within his reach, seeking external validation to satisfy his internal turmoil.

As previously mentioned, when Don marries Megan between seasons 4 and 5, she is still his secretary. Soon after though, Megan decides she wants to explore the possibility of becoming a junior copywriter, a decision Don supports because it reflects his own professional interests and establishes Megan as someone inferior to and reliant on him for direction. In other words, Megan becomes Don’s ideal ‘other’ – someone he can exert control over when he cannot maintain control over himself. In the season 5 episode “Far Away Places” (S5: E5, “Far Away Places”), after Roger tells Don SCDP is thinking about courting Howard Johnson hotels, Don insists on taking Megan on a mini-road trip Upstate, pulling her away from work right before an important presentation. “I’m the boss,” Don says suggestively, “and I’m ordering you.” When Megan starts talking about work in the car though, Don quickly changes the subject, only to redirect the conversation back to work once the couple reaches the hotel and he’s interested in bringing it up. “You like to work, but I can’t like to work,” Megan says bluntly. “You should have told me,” Don says, apparently unaware he has done something to upset his wife.

Don’s ignorance continues to reign supreme (being the most important man in the room is something Don has become used to over the years, after all) when the waitress comes around to take their dessert orders and Megan starts to ask for a slice of pie – only to be interrupted by her husband yet again: “No, you know what, just three scoops of orange sorbet and two spoons.”
After a single bite, Megan pushes the ice cream away – “It tastes like perfume to me” – putting Don on the defensive. “You’re embarrassing me,” he says, upset not only because Megan has just insulted the client’s product in front of them, but because Megan won’t conform to his demands and preferences. This time, Megan doesn’t even pretend to play nice; instead, she starts shoveling hefty spoonfuls of the sorbet into her mouth like a child trying to prove her point. “What’s wrong with you?” Don says patronizingly.

“I don’t know, maybe you could make up a little schedule for when I’m working and when I’m your wife. It gets so confusing,” Megan snaps.

“I know, I’m terrible. Making you eat ice cream. Why don’t you call your mother and hurl a string of complaints at her in French like you always do?”

As the argument continues to mount, Don gets up from the table and marches towards the parking lot. Megan chases after him but refuses to get inside the car even after Don starts the engine. “Get in the car, eat ice cream, leave work, take off your dress,” Megan shouts. “Yes, master.” Don throws the car into reverse and Megan jumps back. As he squeals out of the parking lot, Megan stares after him dumbfounded. By leaving his wife stranded in the middle of nowhere, Don exits the situation feeling as if he has the upper-hand. Megan’s fate is up to him because she can’t go anywhere without him or his car. Megan, however, has other plans, and marches back into the hotel diner, frustrated but not defeated.

When Don pulls the car back into the Howard Johnson’s, it appears little more than half an hour has gone by, but by that point, Megan is nowhere to be found. The waitress tells a frantic Don that she saw Megan leave the restaurant and head for the parking lot with a group of bikers earlier, but when Don heads outside to take a look around, the only trace of his wife he finds are her sunglasses on the ground. After scouring the hotel grounds and making every phone call
imaginable, Don decides to give up and head home, where he discovers the door to his apartment is deadbolted shut – a sure sign that Megan is safely waiting for him on the other side. When Don kicks down the door though, Megan is anything but excited to see her husband again. Instead of running up to embrace him with open arms, she sprints across the living room in the opposite direction, at which point Don pursues her around the apartment until the two collapse on the carpet in tears. “Every time we fight,” Megan says between sobs, “it just diminishes this a little bit.”

![Figure 5: Don and Megan collapse on the living room floor after their big fight in "Far Away Places." (AMC, 2012).](image)

After spending six hours on a bus home from the Howard Johnson’s where her husband left her stranded in a parking lot, Megan is no longer willing to accept any of Don’s excuses. As she gets up off the floor and straightens her dress so she can leave for work, though, Don springs up and grasps her firmly around the waist, desperately pressing his cheek into her midsection. “I thought I lost you,” Don breathes, and perhaps he did. At the very least, Don lost his sense of
control, both over himself and over Megan as his complacent wife. He might have left her, but Megan didn’t need his help getting back, and this independence is what scares Don most about his second wife when their marriage begins to crumble. Don desperately wants to feel whole again, but he refuses to embrace the part of himself that would make that vision a reality. Don rejects the parts of himself that oppose his identity as Don Draper in favor of controlling the image he’s spent half his life revamping. Megan probably comes the closest to trying to accept the person that Don was while also helping him cultivate the person he wants to be, but Don doesn’t want her love – he wants her submission.

**Mistaking Pain for Control**

In season 6 (S6: E9, “The Better Half”), Betty and Don rekindle their connection post-divorce when they’re both visiting their son Bobby (Mason Vale Cotton) at summer camp for a weekend. While the two are lying in bed, Betty expresses her sympathy for Megan as Don’s current wife: “That poor girl, she doesn’t know that loving you is the worst way to get to you.” Born to a prostitute who died giving birth to a child neither she nor his father wanted in the first place, Don has never felt the unconditional love that might lead him to seek out a similar relationship as an adult. Love is simply a fantasy Don chases; his reality is far less worthy of nostalgic musings. Rather than wait for the women in his life to leave him, exposing him to the pain of love lost from his childhood, Don provokes them to leave, as he does with Rachel Menken in season 1, Betty in season 3, and eventually Megan in season 6. The devil you know is far less terrifying than the one you don’t, and by reopening old wounds, Don sabotages himself
as a paradoxical act of control; knowing that his own decisions are the source of his pain gives Don a sense of authority over his own life. Plagued by feelings of worthlessness and guilt from his childhood – and perpetuated by his cycle of leaving and being left as an adult – Don would rather push those who get close to him away than face his own insecurities mirrored in the eyes of someone who can see them, too.

Because Don is in control of where his punishment comes from (his lovers leave him because he provokes them to), Don feels like he has more control over the fate he thinks he deserves for living such a tortured life. Building on his theory of reminiscences, Freud defines masochism as the temptation to perform sinful actions to provoke punishment “from the power of Destiny, a projection of the [conscience] into the outside world” (Newman, 150). When Don is still between marriages in season 4 (S4: E1, “Public Relations”), he calls on a prostitute named Candace for company on Thanksgiving. Before they have sex, Don feigns foreplay until Candace loses her patience and slaps him: “I know what you want.”

“Again,” Don says, “Harder.”

Candace represents Don’s ideal relationship – temporary, entirely physical, and tinged with a twisted combination of pain and pleasure – one that he has cultivated after years of abandonment and abuse. Don regularly seeks out these relationships in real life – recall Bobbie Barrett (Melinda McGraw) who threatens his marriage in season 2 and whom he leaves tied up to a hotel bedpost, and even Megan, with whom he gets into frequently explosive (and sexually charged) arguments – as the perfect repetition of his painful past.

In one of the season’s most talked about episodes, if not one of the most talked about scenes in the series, Don ditches work to meet Sylvia (Linda Cardellini), his primary affair during his marriage to Megan, at a nearby hotel for an afternoon delight that turns into a day-
long affair (S6: E6, “Man With a Plan”). After the assumed deed has been done, Sylvia appears on-screen zipping up her dress, caught mid-rant about one of her husband’s latest mundane offenses. “I don’t want to hear about your husband,” Don says, fashioning his tie into a neat knot.

“I can talk about whatever I want,” Sylvia replies defiantly.

“Can you help me look for my shoes while you do it?” Don asks.

“You want me to look for your shoes?”

Sylvia looks skeptical as Don slowly stops tucking in his shirt and sits down in a chair across from her, legs spread wide in an authoritative stance. “I want you to crawl on your hands and knees until you find them.” Sylvia scoffs, “They’re right over there.” Don stares at her in silence for a few seconds until he says darkly, “Do it.” Sylvia doesn’t crawl, but she does walk over to his shoes and bring them to where Don is sitting, and seductively kneels before him to put the shoes on his feet. “I want you to get undressed and get back into bed,” Don says. Sylvia obeys his demand, enjoying what she understands to be one of Don’s sexual fantasies. “Come over here,” she motions from the bed. But Don doesn’t move; this isn’t Sylvia’s fantasy and Sylvia is not in control. Instead, Don takes the room key off the bedside table and tells Sylvia not to move until he returns at an unspecified time.

Don’s affair with Sylvia is meant to be an escape – from work, from his marriage, from his life – and when he realizes things are starting to become more serious (when Sylvia voices her grievances about her actual husband, it points to a developing level of intimacy between herself and Don), he pulls back because he sees himself losing his grip on their affair as the satisfying, yet temporary transaction he intended it to be. Don prefers to keep his life compartmentalized – Dick Whitman vs. Don Draper, private vs. public, wife vs. mistress – and
he doesn’t appreciate that his growing feelings for Sylvia are playing a role in lowering his defenses.

Don eventually comes back to the hotel (just as he eventually came back to the Howard Johnson’s after abandoning Megan), but when he returns he finds that Sylvia isn’t willing to play his game anymore. “I think it’s time to go home,” she says, picking her coat up off the bed. “I think this is over.”

“It’s over, when I say it’s over,” Don growls.

“It’s over, and not just this.”

“It’s easy to give up something when you’re satisfied,” Don says, a broken look coming over his face. Sylvia looks at him for a moment and then whispers, “It’s easy to give up something when you’re ashamed.” Don knows all too well exactly what Sylvia means when she says this, although they each have their own private cross to bear, but he’s frustrated that she’s using her own shame to turn things around on him. Don likes it best when an affair causes him just enough pain to punish him for what he’s done, but in this case, the pain is being inflicted at someone else’s command and it’s simply not how Don is used to experiencing it. What comes across as kinky to viewers is really the expression of Don’s desire to control where and when his pleasure and pain come from, something most of Don’s women have gladly acceded to. This time though, Sylvia calls out Don’s behavior as something he should be ashamed of, forcing Don to come face to face with the identity he has been striving to deny.
Alone in a Dark Bar

When Megan has her first commercial screen test – an audition Don himself arranged – in the season 5 finale (“The Phantom”), we start to see the first cracks appearing in her marriage to Don. Don leaves the sound stage before filming even begins and wanders into a bar, where he is approached by two attractive young women. As the episode comes to a close, one of the girls whispers in Don’s ear, “Are you alone?” Don sets down his drink and gives the girl a knowing look. Up to this point, Don hasn’t cheated on Megan since they’ve been married, but in this moment he knows what’s about to happen; we know what’s about to happen. We’ve seen it all before.

In his interview about the season 6 premiere with Terry Gross, Weiner reflects on the scene he chose to close out season 5; “Whatever fix [Don] wanted that we saw at the end of season 4 when he proposed to Megan – of having a woman see him the way he wanted to be seen; of [getting] a chance to transform himself into the person he wanted to be; of having this romantic, satisfying, carnal relationship with someone who truly loved him despite knowing everything about him… has dissolved.” Rather than holding onto and continuing to grow the intimacy he has found with Megan, Don abruptly begins the process of pushing her away. She’s seen too much; Don doesn’t want to risk further injury to his ego when – now that she has a career of her own and isn’t reliant on him for financial support and mentorship – his wife finally sees his flaws.

There may be no right way to earn Don’s respect, but it can’t be done by trying to be his emotional equal and confidant. What Don craves is control in order to spin his image and leave his past behind to keep his crippling feelings of unworthiness from puncturing his already partial sense of self, so when Megan decides she is no longer willing to be another minion at work – she
wants to be an actress instead – Don acknowledges her as separate from himself and starts pushing her away before she has the chance to leave him. When Megan acknowledges her dream of being a star, she simultaneously acknowledges her independence as an agent separate from her husband’s influence and free from his manipulation. According to Weiner, Megan’s expression of herself is more than just disorienting for Don, it’s his enemy:

“When she said she wanted to be an actress, that was the part that was really the hardest on the relationship… I thought it was this great dichotomy because she really has an idealistic idea of being an artist, which is a real rejection of Don’s advertising career… It’s like she’s going to reject the part of him that is him, and my joke is always that Don and Megan are soul mates, and they’re one person – and that one person is Don.” (Gross)

It might be a dark bar instead of a dark wood, but now that Don no longer feels tethered to his identity as Don Draper without Megan there to project that self onto, Don is alone and, ultimately, he is lost. Rather than turn his focus on his own future, Don reaches for the only thing he knows: his past. To cheat on Megan and seek solace in the arms of another woman feels safer to Don than figuring out who he is without her. Because he feels like he’s watching his life as Don Draper from a distance and denies his identification with Dick Whitman, Don exists in a state of non-existence and non-agency, stranded in what Nietzsche refers to as “the stream of becoming” without even a Virgil there to guide him on his journey into the inferno. “‘Are you alone?’ to me, was really not just about the fun of the plot,” Weiner says. “I mean, I deliberately – obviously – wanted it to be like, ‘Are you alone? Are you going to sleep with me? But also ‘Are you alone?’ in a deeper sense” (Gross).
Chapter 2

“Full-Blooded Martian”: The Self as Alien and ‘Other’ As External

Figure 6: Ginsberg reflected in the office window in "Far Away Places." (AMC, 2012)

It’s late at night and Peggy Olson (Elisabeth Moss) and Michael Ginsberg (Ben Feldman) are the only two left working in the office. Earlier in the day, Ginsberg’s father came in to visit his son, giving Peggy a warm greeting before Ginsberg hurriedly shuffled him out the door. “Why didn’t you tell me you had a family? Your father’s nice,” Peggy says to Ginsberg, who is seated facing away from her, working at his own typewriter. “He’s not my real father, people don’t understand,” Ginsberg says.

“Are you adopted?” Peggy asks.

“Actually, I’m from Mars.”
Peggy laughs, but Ginsberg continues:

“It’s fine if you don’t believe me but that’s where I’m from. I’m a full-blooded Martian. Don’t worry, there’s no plot to take over Earth, we’re just displaced. I can tell you don’t believe me. That’s okay. We’re a big secret – they even tried to hide it from me. That man – my ‘father’ – told me a story I was born in a concentration camp, but you know that’s impossible. And I never met my mother because she supposedly died there. That’s convenient. Next thing you know, Morris there finds me in a Swedish orphanage. I was five, I remember it.” (S5: E5, “Far Away Places”)

“That’s incredible,” Peggy says after a long silence, her smile fallen and brow furrowed. “Are there others like you?” Ginsberg looks up, the camera focused on the reflection of his face in the glass of the darkened office window.

“I don’t know. I haven’t been able to find any.”

Much like Don, Ginsberg perceives himself as alone in his struggle to reconcile a part of his identity that doesn’t quite fit into the dominant narratives surrounding him. In an office environment that treats women like second-class citizens and takes a more traditional approach to client services – the introduction of Harry Crane’s computer still a far-off fantasy – Ginsberg’s wacky antics and wrinkled shirt-and-tie getups mark him as an outsider at SCDP from the moment he walks in the door. But even more polarizing than his wardrobe and general demeanor in such an environment, however, is his Jewishness. “Have we ever hired any Jews?” Roger asks in preparation for their meeting with Menken’s department store in the series’ pilot (S1: E1, “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”). “Not on my watch,” Don replies with a smug chuckle. “You want me to run down to the deli and grab somebody?” In season 1, Don falls in love with a Jewish
woman and in season 2, Roger marries one, but if we were to sum up the general attitude towards Jewish-Americans on the show, it would be arrogantly ignorant, if not outright anti-Semitic.

Just as Peggy is forced to work on accounts like Clearasil and Belle Jolie because she is a female, Ginsberg is placed in a similarly confining box because he is Jewish, working as SCDP’s token Jew on campaigns for accounts headed by Jewish executives like Manischewitz Wines, and writing quick, quirky copy that was a stamp of the successful Jewish advertising firms at the time (see Chapter 3). Ginsberg’s ‘otherness’ is what defines him; the only problem is that, like Don (and as we’ll see later in this chapter, many of the other similarly plagued characters on the show), Ginsberg doesn’t want to identify with the ‘other’ part of himself. Instead, he feels (literally) alienated from his Jewishness to the point of deluding himself into believing he’s from Mars instead of a Jew born during the Holocaust. Making jokes about Jews in the first episode of the show’s run is a risky move, to say the least, and something Matt Zoller Seitz called Weiner out on when the two sat down together at the Museum of Jewish Heritage to discuss the role of Judaism in the show. In response, though, Weiner said that he felt it was important for viewers to endure moments like this early on because it is in this moment that the definition of “white” – that is, American – immediately becomes “very gray” (Museum of Jewish Heritage), the color Weiner wanted the entire series to be bathed in.

Although the premiere contains the first reference to Jewish oppression on the show, this isn’t the only reference to other forms and victims of oppression in the first episode, and far from being the last time discrimination is portrayed as more than an issue of cultural variance on Mad Men. After all, Don himself was born and raised as a white American, yet he too feels suffocated by the cultural expectations pressing in on him. “The first scene of the show is Don interviewing this African-American man, who it says in the script is too old for his job and his uniform is too
tight, and the proprietor of the bar comes over and asks if he is bothering Don because they are having a conversation,” Weiner tells Seitz in their one-on-one. “Don starts interviewing [the black waiter] in a non-condescending way – he is doing market research. And at the end they bond over the fact that women are dumb because they read magazines” (Museum of Jewish Heritage). Weiner refers to this bonding as ‘out-group denigration,’ when people are brought together by their common prejudices. In this scene, the black waiter is being oppressed because of his race and social status – his boss assumes Don, an affluent-looking white man, would be bothered by a black service worker making conversation. But at the same time, Don and the black waiter – both men – are making oppressive comments about women.

The perilous dynamic this first scene establishes is one the show finds various ways of building on as the series progresses, and one that will be the primary focus of this chapter. The isolation experienced by the Jewish characters on Mad Men – of which there are very few – is representative of the larger sense of isolation and alienation plaguing most of the characters on the show, and an apt development of our continuing discussion about the ‘other’ and how it can be viewed as tangible and, thus, something easily denied or rejected. In the previous chapter, we focused on the past – specifically, Don’s past – and in this chapter we will continue in a similar vein, only this time we consider the past as something that has been inherited, whether as a product of cultural means (namely, religion and race) or something larger that has evolved over the course of centuries and continues to be perpetuated by external and internal forces (namely, gender). This next portion of our journey focuses on Mad Men’s rejection of the ‘other’ as something external or separate; whether or not we recognize the ‘other’ as an inherent part of ourselves, we see it as something tangible that can be denied. But in so doing, not only do we get
further away from our goal of assimilation and self-actualization, we distance ourselves from the people around us by picking and choosing the parts of ourselves that make up the whole.

With Shows Like Mad Men, Doctor, Who Needs Dreams?: Self-Hate and the Jewish-American Experience

In the 1960s, blacks remained objects of discrimination in a big way; slavery in America had been lifted decades before, but as far as their legal rights went, blacks still had a long way to go before they could become accepted as equals in mass society (a problem that many argue remains an issue today). Forced to use separate facilities, discriminated against for certain jobs, and refused service in many places of business, African Americans made up the baseline of what white America had come to label as the ‘other.’ On Mad Men, we see this history reflected when race riots break out in Harlem after Martin Luther King Jr. is shot and killed in season 6, and when ad men are pictured dropping water balloons on black protestors from their high-rise offices, or when Sterling Cooper accidentally forces itself into becoming an “equal opportunity employer” in season 5. We don’t actually see much of the African American experience during the Sixties on the show, but what we are given paints an important picture of blacks as a marginalized culture at the time.

However, after World War II, blacks in America found a fitting friend in the Jewish community. Many Jews who had emigrated from Europe to America to make new homes and raise their families felt disconnected from white society in a way they perceived as similar to the plight of African Americans at the time; according to Ernest van den Haag in his popular
explanation of Jewish attitudes, *The Jewish Mystique*, “Jews identify with the oppressed and deprived Negro treated by his white environment in a way all too familiar to them – a way which cannot but recall the memory of their own oppression, deprivation, and ghettoization” (Franco, 94). As an ‘other’ in a country catered towards white suburban men in positions of financial might, Jews felt their plight made them a natural ally for the urban, black population. During the 1960s, Jewish and African American political organizations worked together to collaborate with the New York City Commission on Human Rights. Originally established in 1949 as a federally funded human rights bureau with the intent of enforcing antidiscrimination policies in education and housing, by the late 1960s, the NYCCHR was beset by many of the tensions it was trying to eliminate, including racial politicking, institutionalized racism, and black and white mutual distrust (Franco, 93); in 1966, the first African American commission chairman, William Booth, challenged the Jewish-African American coalition by increasing the number of blacks on the commission and prioritizing issues primarily affecting middle and working-class blacks and Puerto Ricans – a focus that quickly drew attention to the growing number of Jews holding roles of authority in black urban life with jobs as school teachers, principals, building owners and shopkeepers (Franco, 93).

Although Haag explains this similar-but-not-necessarily-equal dynamic as an unfortunate byproduct of the Jewish desire to help their African American allies – “Now that they are successful, Jews feel they have an obligation to help those who suffer, as they did, from discrimination” (Franco, 94) – other scholars perceive the falling-out between Jews and blacks as a byproduct of the Jewish community’s success at “becoming white” (Franco, 95). In fighting for equality, both Jews and African Americans wanted one thing: to escape life as the ‘other,’ which in America during the mid-twentieth century could only be achieved by assimilating into white
culture. In his interview with Seitz, Weiner notes, "My mother-in-law is a Holocaust survivor. My parents are from the generation before [the one Ginsberg and Rachel Menken belong to]. Their identity is the same story as Don’s identity – ‘How do we become white?’"

Don is a successful, white business man on the outside, but inside he struggles with his past as a “whore child” from rural Pennsylvania, an identity that wouldn’t get him far in the fast-paced and unforgiving culture of New York City. Don knows he wants to be a part of another world, and in order to do that, he has to assimilate as part of the mainstream and reject the things that make him an ‘other,’ just as Ginsberg and the thousands of displaced Jews who now called America their home knew they would have to do. "I don’t generally like sweeping generalizations about the show,” Weiner goes on to say, “but if you want to say it’s the story of how we all feel like outsiders — absolutely.”

“Through Fucking, I Will Discover America”: Chasing the American Dream

Picture this: A Jewish teen, bundled in a wool coat and knitted scarf, clumsily skates behind a group of pretty blond girls on a frozen pond in New Jersey. When the girls take a break to drink hot chocolate, the Jewish boy marvels that their noses are small enough that they don’t get burned when they tip their cups up to meet their lips. In his head, the boy is trying to think of ways to introduce himself to the pretty girls, but he fears his obvious Jewishness will scare them away. “Portnoy, yes, it’s an old French name, a corruption of porte noir” (Roth, 149), he says to himself, brainstorming how he will explain the unpleasant ‘oy’ sound – “Portnoy-oy-oy-oy!” (Roth, 269) – destined to give away his family’s heritage within seconds of introducing himself.
“Oh, what’s the difference anyway,” Portnoy sighs. “I can lie about my name, I can lie about my school, but how am I going to lie about this fucking nose?” (Roth, 149) Perhaps, he thinks, he could say he broke it in a sporting accident. But it’s no use. “These people are Americans,” he proclaims. “Boys whose names are right out of the grade-school reader, not Aaron and Arnold and Marvin, but Johnny and Billy and Jimmy and Tod… Don’t tell me we’re just as good as anybody else, don’t tell me we’re Americans just like they are” (146, Roth).

To be white and marry – or at least bed – a shikse is the only thing Alexander Portnoy craves as a boy and into adulthood in Philip Roth’s wildly popular 1969 novel titled Portnoy’s Complaint about growing up Jewish in twentieth century America. But where, exactly, does all young Portnoy’s scheming and skating land him? Facedown in a snowbank; “For skating after shikses under an alias, I would be a cripple for the rest of my days. With a life like mine, Doctor, who needs dreams?” (Roth, 165). Told from Portnoy’s perspective to an assumed psychotherapist, Roth’s novel is less a story than a raving list of grievances stemming from an oppressively stereotypical Jewish upbringing and Portnoy’s resulting perceived inability to get an erection in the presence of a Jewish woman. True, Portnoy’s Complaint embodies the third-generation Jewish experience of the sixties, something we’ve already established is an important theme within Mad Men’s narrative, but that doesn’t necessarily explain why we see Don Draper – King of the Shikses – reading a copy of the infamous yellow-jacketed book in the culminating season of the show.
At this point in the series (when we find Don curled up with a copy of Roth’s novel), Don is feeling angsty, although nowhere near as angsty as his fictional counterpart, Portnoy; just a few months prior, on a leap of faith (or perhaps a break in sanity), Don revealed his past to the executives visiting Sterling Cooper and Partners (SC&P – post-Cutler Gleason Chaough merger and name change) from Hershey’s Chocolate, only to be shot down by Hershey and booted out of the agency by his co-partners (S6: E12, “In Care Of”). Don’s initial presentation is quintessential Americana: Hershey’s chocolate as the currency of childhood happiness. “Every agency you’re going to meet with feels qualified to advertise a Hershey bar because the product itself is one of the most successful billboards of all time,” Don begins, flipping over a board containing the iconic picture of a Hershey’s chocolate bar. “Its relationship with America is so overwhelmingly positive that everyone in this room has a story to tell. It could be rations in the heat of battle or a movie theater on a first date, but most of them are from childhood.” At this
point, Don tells a touching anecdote about his own father (already we can tell this is a lie; ‘touching’ and Archie Whitman don’t exactly go hand-in-hand from what we’ve seen) taking him to the drugstore after he’s mowed the lawn as a reward for all his hard work: “Forever, his love and the chocolate were tied together.” It’s a beautiful thought, that a single product could be tied to the American dream – that the desire to fit in could be satisfied as easily as satisfying one’s sweet tooth.

But Don doesn’t stop there because he can’t stop there – even when it appears the folks from Hershey are sold on the picture Don has painted. “I’m sorry, I have to say this because I don’t know if I’ll ever see you again,” he says to confused stares from everyone in the boardroom. “I was an orphan. I grew up in Pennsylvania in a whorehouse.” When he was younger, Don says he read about the Hershey orphanage and how the children there lived a better life.

“I could picture it, I dreamt of it – of being wanted – because the woman who was forced to raise me would look at me every day like she hoped I would disappear. The closest I ever felt to being wanted was from a girl who made me go through her John’s pockets while they screwed. If I collected more than a dollar, she’d buy me a Hershey bar and I would eat it, alone in my room, with great ceremony, feeling like a normal kid.” (S6: E12, “In Care Of”)

The camera focuses on the different reactions from everyone at the table, most either sitting dumbfounded or with faces twisted in disgust. “You want to advertise that?” one of the men from Hershey asks, concern painted on his face. Don is unapologetic when his coworkers confront him later about his off-script foray in the meeting; if he can’t live a lie, he certainly can’t sell one, but it’s this inability to suppress the things that made his upbringing different from
the picture-perfect childhoods all ‘true’ Americans are supposed to have that forces his partners to put him on leave in the coming months.

Once, Don had idyllic visions of fitting in, of finding happiness like every other boy his age, and eventually Don got about as close as any little boy could dream; becoming a creative director at a successful advertising agency with a beautiful wife and two children is a fate only the men on Madison Avenue could have concocted in a moment of marketing inspiration. Yet, there is another life entirely that Don can’t seem to let go, and it’s one that he goes back to again and again, with devastating results. Near the end of his ‘session,’ Portnoy echoes Don’s frustration when he relents that, somehow, he has strayed from the dream of growing up and into a man much like his father – proud of his Jewishness, with a Jewish wife and Jewish children, a member of a Jewish softball team who comes home to a kosher meal at the end of the day – an alternative to the American dream, but one equally as utopian in its portrayal of acceptance within a community:

“And? What’s so wrong? Hard work in an idealistic profession; games played without fanaticism or violence, games played among like-minded people, and with laughter; and family forgiveness and love. What was so wrong with believing in all that? What happened to the good sense I had at nine, ten, eleven years of age? How have I come to be such an enemy and flayer of myself? And so alone! Oh, so alone! Nothing but self! Locked up in me!” (Roth, 248)

Hershey’s is the symbol for love and acceptance, and love and acceptance is the perceived currency of the American population and community. But what if you fall outside of these narratives? Don himself was raised to believe he was unwanted and, no matter how much he has done to prove otherwise, he will continue to do things that will provoke those around him –
whether on a professional or romantic level (and sometimes both) – to prove his fears of abandonment right. And as for Portnoy, even though he desires nothing more than to find a place of acceptance, he continually takes drastic measures to separate himself from the community he was born into simply so he can become a member of the community of white Americans he watched from afar in his youth and sexually exploits as an adult.

“The Place That Cannot Be”: *The ‘Other’ as Something – or Someone – Else*

When Portnoy takes a trip to Israel – “In this country, everybody is Jewish” (Roth, 253) – he expects he will finally be rid of his drive to be white; perhaps when he is in a country where his people are the majority, he will finally feel comfortable identifying as himself rather than desiring to separate himself from the minority. Instead, though, Portnoy finds himself desperately grabbing at Jewish women to finally demonstrate his ability to literally conquer his Jewish identity, only to be met with rejection in the form of a swift head-butt to the skull. “Do you know,” Naomi, an Israeli soldier Portnoy has convinced himself he must have, says after knocking Portnoy off her, “there is something very wrong with you… You are the most unhappy person I have ever known… The way you disapprove of your life! Why do you do that? It is of no value for a man to disapprove of his life the way you do. You seem to take some special pleasure, some pride, in making yourself the butt of your own peculiar sense of humor” (Roth,
After listening to Naomi’s lecture, Portnoy considers what she’s said for a moment and tries again: “Wonderful. Now let’s fuck.”

“You are disgusting!”

“Right! You begin to get the point, gallant Sabra! You go be righteous in the mountains, okay? You go be a model for mankind! Fucking Hebrew saint!” (Roth, 265)

“Mr. Portnoy,” Naomi says finally, “you are nothing but a self-hating Jew” (Roth, 265).

Rather than internalizing his identity, Portnoy externalizes it in the form of another person – someone he can physically control and push away at will. Portnoy isn’t trying to deny his desire to be anyone but who he is; rather, he is trying to find someone else who can embody his Jewishness for him. It’s not his fault he can’t fully exist as a part of the world around him, whether that’s the white culture he so desperately wants to assimilate into or the Jewish heritage he forcefully rejects as an undesirable ‘otherness’; white people won’t let him be Jewish, and the Jews in his life have done nothing but remind him of all the ways he’s strayed from their oppressive path. Portnoy, like Don, would rather feel pain as a pleasurable reminder that he has successfully externalized the part of himself he sees as a threat – only an external or outside force can cause oneself physical pain – than accept himself as a victim of his internally consuming ‘otherness.’ In his attempts to dissociate himself from his Jewish upbringing so he can wriggle out from beneath the thumb of white society, Portnoy rejects and thus externalizes his ‘otherness’ as an outside entity he can conquer, sexually or otherwise.

In the season 1 episode “Babylon” (S1: E6, “Babylon”), we learn that even Israel, the Jewish homeland, is seeking to disassociate itself from its religious background; when the Israeli Tourism Bureau pays Sterling Cooper a visit, they do so in the hopes that a good advertising campaign will encourage white travelers to make the pilgrimage for reasons not necessarily
listed in the Old Testament. Don, however, knows very little about the land and the culture he is supposed to be whipping up an advertisement for, so in addition to updating his reading list – furiously flipping through *Exodus*, a popular romance novel about the exodus of Jews after WWII, after meeting with the bureau – Don decides it would be a good idea to call up Rachel Menken (Maggie Siff) – with whom he recently attempted a brief affair in episodes prior – even after the two had a falling out when Don mentioned he happens to be married. “I’m the only Jew you know in New York City? ... I’m not really sure what I can say,” Rachel says with a twinge of impatience when they take their seats across from each other in a midtown restaurant. “I’m American, and I’m really not very Jewish. If my mother hadn’t died having me, I could have been Marilyn instead of Rachel and no one would know the difference.” Being Jewish is simply a label Rachel identifies with, not necessarily a mantra she lives by, and even then her identification comes across as more of an active rejection than a passive acceptance or ignorance; it’s a fact of her upbringing and birth, but when it comes down to whether it’s something she embraces? Not exactly so.

“Look, Jews have lived in exile for a long time,” Rachel says when Don keeps prompting her for more (talking about something she doesn’t believe in, it seems, proves preferable to giving into Don’s thinly veiled advances). “First in Babylon and then all over the world – Shanghai, Brooklyn – we’ve managed to make a go of it. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that we thrive at doing business with people who hate us.” Dressed in a fitted suit and decked out in jewels, Rachel is a far cry from the traditionalist Jews and Hassidim Don and the rest of his white cohort think of when they think of the ‘other.’ In his interview with Seitz, Weiner mentions that the purpose of traditionalist garb and Hassidic villages – similar to the Amish, he notes – is to maintain a sense of separateness. Rachel has no desire to be labeled as
any more separate than she already is as a woman trying to run her father’s high-end business. “Don is striving for the same thing,” Weiner says. “They’re both there with their fake success suits on” (Museum of Jewish Heritage). To internally know that one is an outsider is a far different thing from putting that outsider status on display; when Don calls on her to ask about her religion, Rachel takes it as an insult. After all, it was she who first put her finger on Don as an outsider in the series’ pilot when she said, “I don’t know what you believe in, but I do know what it’s 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. There’s something about you that tells me you know it, too.” Why can’t she be a separate entity from her otherness, if Don gets to wake up every morning and put his aside, too?

To have a place like Israel, “a country for ‘those people,’ as you call us,” Rachel says, is important, despite the fact that she doesn’t live there herself. “I’ll visit, but I don’t have to live there. It just has to be. For me it’s more of an idea than a place.”

“A utopia,” Don says, optimistically reaching for Rachel’s hand in the hopes that maybe, for them as well, there could be a place that exists in a perfect world where they could be together and separate from everything else.

“Maybe,” Rachel says, slowly removing her hand from Don’s grasp. “They taught us at Barnard about that word – ‘utopia’ – the Greeks had two meanings for it: Eutopos, meaning ‘the good place,’ and utopos, meaning ‘the place that cannot be.’” When Portnoy goes to Israel, he does so in the hopes that he can find a place where his separateness can be transformed into a sort of togetherness, but just as Rachel and Don’s romance can never be, neither can Portnoy’s version of utopia: “Ow, my heart! And in Israel! Where other Jews find refuge, sanctuary and peace, Portnoy now perishes! Where other Jews flourish, I now expire!” (Roth, 271) Is it that
characters like Don, Rachel and Portnoy can’t accept the part of themselves that is necessary to find peace, even in the presence of others like them that they continue to feel alienated from themselves and the world around them? Or is it that, when they *do* embody that part of themselves, they do so by channeling it into something separate – something or someone that can cause them external pain – without being forced to accept the internal burden that comes with it?

**The Trouble with Narcissists: Perceiving Blame as Outside the Self**

Perhaps the real flaw these characters can’t seem to get past, and the reason they can’t see themselves in relation to the larger world around them, is that they are blinded by a severe case of narcissism. Several scholars have noted that generations coming of age since the Great Depressions have developed consciences different from those of their grandparents. In Studs Terkel’s oral history of the Great Depression, *Hard Times*, Terkel interviewed several psychiatrists about the changing ethos associated with the generally optimistic economic uptick after the Depression. According to Dr. Nathan Ackerman, who was interviewed for *Hard Times*, before the *Mad Men* generation, “People who came in for treatment were preoccupied with internal suffering … [they] felt burdened by an excess of conscience … an excess of guilt and wrongdoing … [Since the 1960s] there’s no such guilt” (Newman, 22).

Whereas most of the people who lived in the years immediately following the Depression saw their problems as self-created and lived according to rigid internal standards, many of the
people who lived after didn’t experience guilt as a “disturbance within their skin” (Newman, 22); later generations were much more likely to attribute their troubles to external causes, to possess a sense of self that is less intact, and a conscience that is less self-blaming. Because they perceive themselves as victims rather than active participants, those who are a product of the modern era suffer from internal fragility and a bruised ego. To put it simply, they are narcissists. Narcissists can’t bear to feel painful emotions like self-doubt, anxiety, shame and inadequacy, so instead they twist their feelings and perceptions until they experience the threat as outside of them (Newman, 23). Because they experience reality with a weakened, less-inclusive sense of self—the problem doesn’t exist as a part of them, it is the fault of the other—narcissists become less self-incriminating and assume less personal responsibility for their actions and choices.

**Playing the Blame Game**

In the season 7 episode “The Forecast” (S7: E10, “The Forecast”), Don is approached by John Mathis (Trevor Einhorn), one of his creative underlings, concerning how to correct a blunder he made in a pitch by losing his temper and swearing in front of a client. “I interrupted a client in a presentation for Lucky Strike, one of our biggest clients. I wasn’t supposed to talk at all. I knew if I apologized, they’d never want to work with me again,” Don says. “So at the next meeting, I walked in, shook Lee Garner’s hand and said ‘I can’t believe you have the balls to come back here after you embarrassed yourself like that.’” Mathis laughs and nods with understanding. “I don’t know, bring in a bar of soap, tell them it’s there in case you need to wash your mouth out, something like that,” Don advises. Anything is better than failing, and to Don,
an apology – internalizing the responsibility as a fault of your own – is a show of weakness and a
failure of character. Fast-forward to the next meeting with Mathis’s client though, and it’s
apparent an apology – anything, really – would have gone over better than the stunt Mathis pulls.

“I made your joke and it failed,” Mathis says, storming into Don’s office after the
meeting.

“The soap thing?” Don asks.

“No,” Mathis says, “The one where I told them they were assholes.”

Don looks taken aback. “You could have thought of something yourself, you know,” Don
says defensively.

“I did. It was apologize,” Mathis says. “But guys like you don’t understand that because
you don’t have to do it.”

“Guys like me know how to do it,” Don argues.

“Roger tells that story, too,” Mathis says, referring to Don’s anecdote about his Lucky
Strike blunder. “But he says that Lee Garner Jr. was in love with you. That you always had to be
at the meetings so he could think about jacking you off.”

“You have a foul mouth,” Don quickly retorts. “Take responsibility for your failure. That
account was handed to you and you made nothing of it\(^1\) because you have no character.”

Mathis’s failure isn’t Don’s, and even though Don has never apologized for his behavior in these
situations, he expects more out of Mathis. Mathis, however, isn’t going to let someone like Don
pin him with the blame for a lack of character.

\(^1\) In the series finale, we see Don echo this criticism, only this time he’s criticizing
himself (see Chapter 3).
“You don’t have any character,” Mathis says. “You’re just handsome. Stop kidding yourself.”

“Everybody has problems,” Don says after a moment. “Some people can handle them, some people can’t. Look at yourself because the next thing you’re going to have to look past is losing your job. You’re fired.”

It’s easy for Don to point his finger at Mathis. A classic narcissist, Don doesn’t associate himself with his own faults, let alone the faults of other people. In this situation, Mathis is most at fault – he’s the one who got himself in trouble when he didn’t have the sense to apologize in the first place – but it’s notable that Mathis uses his own refusal to take responsibility for his mistake as an opportunity to point out Don’s own tendency to do the same. According to Mathis, the only reason Don got away with back-talking Lee Garner Jr. is because he looked good doing it. Later in the same episode, Sally Draper (Kiernan Shipka) calls out her father for “oozing” anytime someone pays attention to him or her mother – and they always do, she says; whereas Don and his ex-wife can skate by on their attractive exteriors – having effectively disassociated their exterior appearances from the ugly interiors lying just beneath their pretty faces – people like Mathis still feel the need to apologize, a clumsy sign that they still maintain ownership of their faults. Essentially, what Don is saying when he says everyone has their problems, some people just deal with them better, is that whereas some people can push their mistakes out of sight and out of mind, other people make the mistake of taking responsibility for their actions by addressing them.
The ‘Mad Masters’ Made Me Do It

When Pete Campbell makes the mistake of sleeping with the German au pair down the hall while his wife Trudy (Alison Brie) is away for the weekend, he doesn’t necessarily apologize for his actions, but then again he can’t entirely renounce them either (S3: E8, “Souvenir”). The moment Trudy walks in the door after returning from her mini-vacation, she can tell something is off about her husband; “What’s wrong?” she asks, when Pete doesn’t respond to any of her prying. “Peter, look at me. Did something happen?” Pete looks up, meeting his wife’s gaze with tears in his eyes. Trudy leaves the room, knowing there’s only one thing her husband could have been up to in her absence, but maybe not aware of how close to home it happened. The next day at dinner, Trudy frantically tries to make small talk to avoid talking about the elephant (or au pair) in the room when Pete stops her. “Trudy,” he says slowly. “I don’t want you to go away anymore without me.”

“Good,” Trudy says sternly. “I won’t.”

Pete is ashamed his transgression hurt his wife, but more than that, he is frightened by how thoughtlessly he committed such a transgression without his wife around to babysit him. When his neighbor drops by a few days later, Pete acts like he has no idea why on earth he – the au pair’s boss – could be upset with him, a denial Pete’s neighbor knowingly strikes down: “Look, there are plenty of nannies in this neighborhood. Just stay away from her. In fact, be smart – stay out of the building.” Somewhere along the way, Pete lost sight of the man he thought he was and turned into one he didn’t recognize.

This disconnect between Pete’s opposing personalities is something Plato explores in his Republic, which recounts the night-long conversation between the philosopher Socrates and a group of his close friends and acquaintances. At one point in the evening, a retired arms
merchant, Cephalus – at whose home the group is gathered – remarks that, finally, in his old age, he has found release from the bondage of his ‘mad masters’ (Dunn, 23). His mad masters, he goes on to explain, are the tyrannous passions he says would take his reason “hostage” and drive him to do things he would later regret (Dunn, 23). As we will explore further in Chapter 3, Plato believes that the emotional side of the human brain holds more power over our behavior than reason, which is why we experience emotional responses to evocative stimuli like theater and advertising, and how Plato explains the separation between Cephalus’s passionate and rational selves. When Pete asks Trudy never to leave him alone again, he externalizes his actions as the product of his mad masters, not a product of his own rational volition, leaving it up to Trudy to hold him accountable and keep his demons at bay; the only possible excuse Pete can fathom for having let himself be lured down the hall and into the arms of another woman is that something strange – a side of himself he doesn’t recognize – hijacked his ability to reason. It was something outside of him, something beyond his control that made him do something his rational self would never even consider.

Although Pete becomes less and less apologetic as the series continues (sleeping around the neighborhood gets him in trouble more than once), choosing to internalize his decisions – and their consequences – as his own rather than a product of some disorienting other-self, the regret Pete expresses for cheating on his wife in a moment of weakness is a sentiment that plagues several, if not all of the other characters on the show from season to season. Months after they share their first kiss, Ted Chaough (Kevin Rahm) and Peggy finally consummate their flirtation at the end of season 6 (S6: E12, “In Care Of”) when Ted ambushes Peggy outside her apartment, promising to leave his wife for her. The very next day though, Ted goes to Don and begs Don to let him take the creative job opening on the west coast so he can get away from the temptation of
a relationship with Peggy. “I’m going to California,” he says to Peggy when he finally works up the courage to confront her. “You can stay here and have your life and your career and let this be the past.”

Figure 8: Ted breaks the news to Peggy that he's leaving for California at the end of season 6. (AMC, 2013).

When Peggy protests, assuming it must have been someone else’s decision to send Ted to California, Ted calmly reassures her that this decision was of his own choosing; the man standing before her – ending their affair and breaking his promise – and the man who showed up in desperate need of her on her doorstep the night before are indeed one and the same. “I wanted this so much, but I have a family. The world out there – I have to hold onto them or I’ll get lost in the chaos,” he says. “You have to listen to me. I love you that deeply, I can’t be around you and I can’t ruin all those lives.” Sleeping with Peggy was a mistake, but in Ted’s mind, the mistake was no fault of his own; it was his feelings for Peggy that made him do it. The man Ted recognizes is the one with a family, not the one who cheats on his loving wife and abandons his two sons. “Someday you’ll be glad I made this decision,” Ted says solemnly.
“Well aren’t you lucky,” Peggy spits back, “to have decisions.”

Ted leaves the office, but Peggy remains, staring after him. Ted will leave for California without any of the baggage he would have had to carry if he stayed in New York, whereas Peggy will always have to carry the consequences of Ted’s decisions.

The Feminine Mistake: Embracing the ‘Other’ As a Fact of Womanhood

“I really don’t feel well, I’ll be right back,” Sally Draper tells Glen Bishop (Marten Holden Weiner), a childhood friend who comes to visit in the season 5 episode “Commissions and Fees” (S5: E11, “Commissions and Fees”), before running off to find the nearest ladies room. Rather than go on a weekend vacation with her mother, stepfather and brothers, Sally has decided to stay with Don and Megan in the city, calling on Glen who’s away at school to come spend the afternoon wandering around the Museum of Natural History with her. “Okay, meet me in Africa,” Glen calls after Sally. When Sally finally bursts into a bathroom and pulls down her stockings in the stall though, she is surprised by what she finds: against the white of her underwear is a small spot of blood. Her eyes widen and she furiously starts grabbing handfuls of toilet tissue to try to clean up the mess.

Sally is so upset by her discovery that she panics and immediately leaves the museum to catch a cab back to her home in Upstate New York, abandoning Glen in the city. “I got my – my period started, and I didn’t know what to do,” Sally stutters when Betty confronts her about the $25 cab fee she racked up after her sudden return. “I just wanted to come home.” Betty looks
started and confused when Sally rushes forward to hug her; it’s as if this is the first time Betty is actually engaging in an affectionate exchange with one of her children and she doesn’t quite know how to respond. “It’s okay, sweetheart,” Betty says hesitantly, pulling Sally closer and gradually easing into the hug. “It’s okay.” Back in Manhattan, Megan comes home from an audition to find Glen – a boy she’s never met before – and an otherwise empty apartment. Betty calls Megan to explain: “[Sally] became a woman today. She started. I think she needed her mother.” Megan might have been the one Sally wanted for a weekend of playing grownup, but it was Betty that she came home to when the facts of being a woman became real. *This is what it feels like to be a mother,* Betty must be thinking for the first time. *This must be what it’s like to be needed.*

*Figure 9:* Sally discovers she’s started her first period and joins the sisterhood of women (at the Museum of Natural History, no less) in season 5. (AMC, 2012)

After she gets off the phone with Megan, Betty finds Sally lying in bed curled around a hot-water bottle. “Move over, I want to lie down,” Betty says crawling in next to Sally. “There’s
a lot of responsibilities, but that’s what being a woman is. And when it happens every month, even though it’s unpleasant, it means everything’s working. It means everything’s ready for a baby when you want one. And maybe you’ll have a beautiful girl and you can tell her all this.”

Being a woman isn’t all dinner parties, afternoons spent lying around on fainting couches and weekdays spent busying oneself by keeping an eye on the nanny; there’s a lot of blood, sweat and tears that go into carrying the burden of being a female. But even though Betty seems to be painting a portrait of femininity that’s rather rewarding in this moment, Sally’s response to her first glimpse of womanhood is more akin to something out of a horror movie than a sentiment of awe. And in many ways, Sally’s response is justified.

Figure 10: Sally reads a copy of Rosemary’s Baby in the season 6 episode "The Crash." (AMC, 2013)

In season 6 we see Sally – now slightly older and wiser, or at least more skeptical of the world around her – reading a copy of Ira Levin’s 1967 horror novel/social satire Rosemary’s Baby before bed (S6: E8, “The Crash”). We don’t get much comment from Sally about the book at the time – moments later, the apartment is broken into by a thief claiming to be Don’s
“mother” – but later in the same season (a little over a year has gone by) we’re given Megan’s take on the popular movie based on Levin’s book when she and Don go to see it together: “That was really, really scary,” she says. “It was disturbing,” Don confirms in response (S6: E11, “The Quality of Mercy”). In Chuck Palahniuk’s introduction to Levin’s book, Palahniuk suggests that it’s the power of proximity in Rosemary’s Baby that makes it so disturbing. “Before Ira Levin, horror always happened somewhere else,” Palahniuk writes. “It was a comfort to know that real, life-threatening horror never occurred at home” (Palahniuk, vii). Levin does more than set his novel in an accessible apartment complex on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, and plant the threat (a cult of Satan-worshipping witches) just on the other side of Rosemary’s wall – he writes a story in which the threat actually derives from within; the ‘other’ can be scary, but what happens when your own body becomes the incubator of your greatest fears?

**Monsters Inside Me**

With her ankles strapped into a pair of metal stirrups and legs spread wide, the pale green walls of the doctor’s office closing in around her, Peggy is – very literally – trapped. It’s the series’ pilot and Peggy’s first day at the office as a secretary. “I see from your chart – and your finger – that you’re not married,” the doctor says, “and yet you’re interested in the contraceptive pills.” On Joan’s recommendation, Peggy has decided to set up an appointment with a gynecologist so she can go on the Pill. At the same time though, Peggy knows that her decision to seek out contraception as a single woman in the 1960s is a risk in itself; birth control was still illegal in some states (Reagan, 94). “There’s no reason to be nervous,” the doctor reassures
Peggy, interrupting her before she can explain herself. “Joan sent you to me because I’m not here to judge you. There’s nothing wrong with a woman being practical about the possibility of sexual activity – spread your knees.”

“That’s good to hear,” Peggy says, eyeing the metal forceps the doctor picks up after slipping on a pair of synthetic gloves.

“Although, as a doctor, we’d like to think that putting a woman in this situation isn’t going to turn her into some kind of strumpet.”

Peggy squirms slightly.

“I warn you now, I will take you off this medicine if you abuse it. It’s for your own good, really,” the doctor continues. “The fact is that, even in our modern times, easy women don’t find husbands.”

“I understand Dr. Emerson,” Peggy says, nodding emphatically. “I really am a responsible person.”

Peggy knows that it is up to her doctor whether she will have access to the Pill. The only agency Peggy really has in this situation is to demonstrate that she has no intention of showing any agency in the future. To be a woman, Peggy will learn, is to accept the consequences others choose for her. Just as she is forced to accept the burden of Ted’s decision to leave at the end of season 6, when Peggy eventually makes the decision to have sex – as she does when Pete Campbell comes knocking on her door at the end of the series’ pilot – she must accept the consequences associated with whether a doctor decides to give her access to the Pill. Peggy is trapped by her biology, but also by the external forces that determine whether or not she should have control over her own body.
About nine months later, though – in the season 1 finale – Peggy ends up in the hospital with crippling abdominal pain. “Honey, you didn’t mention that you were expecting,” the doctor attending to her says, gently pressing on her stomach. “What?” Peggy asks, clearly confused.

“You’re going to be a mother,” the doctor says.

“That’s impossible,” Peggy says.

“Listen, we’re going to get you up to maternity.”

“No, no. That’s not possible,” Peggy says more sternly this time.

The narrative surrounding female sexuality and biology is a taboo one in 1960, so in Peggy’s situation – as a single, Catholic woman – it would indeed feel impossible to consider the fact that she might actually be pregnant; Mad Men itself contributes to Peggy’s denial by keeping her pregnancy plot under wraps as a surprise plot-twist in the season finale, thus denying the opportunity to engage in a conversation about abortion or the dilemmas a young woman like Peggy would have faced during that era because there was no conversation – it just didn’t happen.
When the doctor places Peggy’s hand on her own stomach so she can feel her baby better, Peggy looks up at him bitterly; what’s happening to her own body is entirely unfamiliar to her and largely out of her control at this point, but when she doubles over in pain from a contraction, she has no choice but to give into the force inside of her. Later, when Peggy is lying in her hospital bed staring at the ceiling after giving birth, a nurse brings in her baby for her to see: “Would you like to hold him?” In response, Peggy turns her head away until the nurse, who looks disappointed and somewhat disgusted by Peggy, leaves. In the gynecologist’s office twelve episodes earlier, we saw Peggy lying in a similar position staring at a calendar depicting a lush mountain scene, longing to be somewhere else mentally since she couldn’t do so physically. The prison Peggy finds herself confined to after giving birth is slightly more abstract than the metal stirrups she found herself strapped into at the beginning of the season – but equally as
nightmarish. This time Peggy has a choice, but it’s a choice she’s aware will continue to haunt her for years to come; by disassociating herself from her son and moving on with her life, Peggy can continue to grow as an individual with a promising career ahead of her, but she will also have to suffer the consequences of denying her responsibilities as a mother and woman.

In a sense, a baby is the cumulative result of external forces on a woman’s body. Pregnancy is only possible – on a literal level – when an external entity (a male’s sperm) is introduced to the internal reproductive system of a woman’s body; on a more abstract level though, feminist theorists argue that pregnancy is “much like a socially constructed initiation rite” (Hoffman, 242), during which women gradually assimilate motherhood into their identities as dictated by society’s expectations. A baby is the external embodiment of a woman’s internal self, but it is also an embodiment and reminder of the forces that brought about its conception. If a woman doesn’t embrace her role as an ‘other’ – a female whose biology has predestined them to become a mother – she cannot create an ‘other.’

In *Rosemary’s Baby*, when Rosemary and Guy Woodhouse move into the Bramford to start their life as newlyweds, Rosemary is looking forward to embracing her traditional role as a woman and wife. Regardless of whether her decision is influenced by social pressures encouraging her to become a mother – with her husband away at work all day and nothing else to do but decorate the apartment and daydream about taking care of a baby, becoming a mother is perhaps Rosemary’s only choice – Rosemary’s decision, unlike Peggy’s, is entirely voluntary. Things get dicey, though, when she and Guy are supposed to have sex on a specific night of Rosemary’s menstrual cycle, but Rosemary is too drunk to give her consent. Later in the book we learn that this is the intent (Rosemary is drugged by her husband and neighbors so they can carry her unconscious body to their apartment where she will be impregnated with Satan’s
spawn) but at the time, Rosemary assumes that her loving husband took advantage of her in a way she never expected him to: “Guy had taken her without her knowledge, had made love to her as a mindless body (‘kind of fun in a necrophile sort of way’) rather than as the complete mind-and-body person she was… She wished that no motive and no number of drinks could have enabled him to take her that way, taking her body without her soul or self or she-ness” (Levin, 86). To become pregnant, Rosemary gives up a part of herself – the part of herself that is her self – and becomes nothing more than a vessel for a fetus, a being devoid of any identification as ‘Rosemary.’

As the pregnancy (it’s difficult to call it Rosemary’s pregnancy because there are so many other people involved) progresses, rather than becoming more familiar to her, Rosemary’s body becomes more and more alien; she gets a drastic haircut (the infamous Vidal Sassoon ‘do), loses a concerning amount of weight, and develops a taste for raw meat. Not long after relaying these strange observations to her doctor, Rosemary hits a low-point when she finds herself in the kitchen at four o’clock in the morning eating a raw chicken heart. “She looked at herself in the toaster, where her moving reflection had caught her eye, and then looked at her hand, at the part of the heart she hadn’t yet eaten held in dripping red fingers” (Levin, 135). Horrified by what she sees, Rosemary proceeds to throw the heart away, wash her hands and vomit in the sink. In the process of becoming a mother and fulfilling her duties as a wife and woman, Rosemary barely recognizes herself; her reflection is a terrifying ‘other’ instead of a familiar face.
Females possess the biological ability to become pregnant; whether or not a woman chooses to embrace that part of her biological makeup, her ‘otherness’ – and ability to produce an ‘other’ – is a fact of life. But perhaps what’s most interesting about how the women of *Mad Men* deal with pregnancy and motherhood is the way each of them chooses to either internalize or externalize the parts of themselves they recognize in their children when they *do* decide to become mothers. Take for instance, when Joan lashes out at her babysitter and son in the season 7 episode “The Forecast” (S7: E10, “The Forecast”): after a dinner out together, Joan and her new beau Richard (Bruce Greenwood) check into a hotel, but before they can continue their evening together, Joan has to make a call home to ask her babysitter if she can stay just a few hours later. In this moment, Richard realizes he isn’t just dating Joan – he’s dating her young son, as well. “You’re ruining my life!” Joan shouts, referring to her babysitter and toddling son the morning after Richard brutally dumps her. When Joan initially decides to take responsibility for her son, Kevin, as an intrinsic part of her identity, refusing to get an abortion (Kevin is the product of a heated moment between herself and Roger – both married to different people at the time – in season 4) and raising him on her own, she also decides to relinquish her independence as an individual. Joan’s son is an extension of herself, but when he impedes her ability to live independent of him, Joan sees Kevin as a separate entity responsible for inconveniencing her.

Betty exhibits similar behavior when she scolds Sally for cutting her hair and masturbating at a friend’s house in “The Chrysanthemum and the Sword” (S4: E5, “The Chrysanthemum and the Sword”). Betty is a severely oppressed character who tries to adhere unwaveringly to her role as a dedicated housewife and a picture-perfect specimen of femininity. But there are also many instances in which we see Betty rebel against her role, like when she
masturbates against her washer and dryer to the image of a traveling air conditioner salesman (S1: E4, “New Amsterdam”), or when she takes aim at her neighbor’s pet carrier pigeons with a shotgun after her neighbor threatens to shoot the Draper’s dog (S1: E9, “Shoot”). When Betty confides in a therapist about Sally’s recent string of rebellions, she says, “I feel like Sally did this to punish me”; Betty sees herself as a separate entity from Sally – hence she punishes her for behaving badly – but she also identifies with daughter enough to assume that Sally’s choices have something to do with and affect her. Betty recognizes the urges she works so hard to repress reflected in her daughter’s behavior and, by punishing Sally for it, separates herself from and externalizes these behaviors as belonging to someone else. Just as Joan portrays herself as a victim of her son’s dependence, Betty sees herself as a victim of Sally’s bad behavior rather than the source of her own urges.

Peggy’s case is perhaps the most revealing in that, although Peggy initially denies her role as a mother, her decision to reject her ‘otherness’ continues to haunt her even when she appears to be doing everything right (although not necessarily by feminine standards of what is ‘right’). Because her womanhood is such an intrinsic part of her identity, her refusal to fulfill her role leaves her lacking rather than giving her space to grow on her own. “Look, you got to a certain point in your life and it didn’t happen. I understand you’re angry about it, but you’ve got a lot of other things. I mean it – you couldn’t have done what you’ve done otherwise,” Stan Rizzo (Jay Ferguson) tells Peggy in the season 7 episode “Time & Life” (S7: E11, “Time & Life”). In this scene, Peggy and Stan are working late after a long day of casting kids for an upcoming TV spot, but Peggy is struggling to focus on the task at hand after one of the kid’s mothers snapped at her earlier in the episode.
“I don’t hate kids,” Peggy tells Stan, who doesn’t know Peggy actually had a child years ago before she gave it away. “I guess that’s the secret to your spectacular career – the fact that you don’t have kids?”

“Not that I know of,” Stan chuckles.

“That’s funny to you,” Peggy says, “because it doesn’t matter if you did, you can walk away.”

“I would never do that,” Stan counters, insulted that Peggy would assume he could be capable of something so barbaric.

“But you may not even know, that’s what you said,” Peggy points out.

At this point, Stan looks exasperated and so does Peggy, who puts down the notepad she’s been working on. “It’s been a long day,” she says. Stan relents, apologizing for what he initially said about the woman who upset Peggy earlier in the day. “I didn’t mean to judge her,” he sighs.

“But you did, and you don’t understand at all,” Peggy says.

“I had a mother and she wasn’t great, and I don’t even know if she wanted me, so I understand something.”

“But you don’t understand your mother.”

“Well, maybe I don’t want to.”

“Well maybe she was very young and followed her heart and got in trouble,” Peggy says with tears welling in her eyes, “and no one should have to make a mistake just like a man does and not be able to move on. She should be able to live the rest of her life just like a man does.”

Peggy chose to live her own life rather than put her future in someone else’s hands – those of society, who dictates she should be a selfless mother, and her son, for whom she would
have had to give up a part of herself to take care of. The horror for many women during the time *Mad Men* takes place was that their lives – their decisions, their feelings, their appearances – weren’t really their own unless they made decisions like Peggy’s that would further alienate them from a part of themselves and those around them. When Rosemary experiences unnatural pains associated with her pregnancy, she listens to her neighbors who reassure her that the pain is to be expected, ignoring her intuition in favor of listening to the flawed insistence of those around her – those who don’t have a right to her body or have to experience her pain; “Until now it had been inside her; now she was inside it” (Levin, 131). Rosemary becomes a victim within her own body and a passive object to be manipulated by the world telling her she is to be a woman and mother above all else. To be white might have been the American dream, but to be a man free of consequences and free to make their own choices (not that *Mad Men* doesn’t challenge this notion in many ways, as well) was a woman’s dream. A woman is never simply herself, but rather the product of multiple factors; she must be an angel of the house, a support system, a lover and a mother – and all at once. Her otherness isn’t simply a part of herself she can separate herself from; the definition of her role in human society is to be an ‘other.’
In the season two premiere “For Those Who Think Young” (S2: E1, “For Those Who Think Young”), Don is sitting in a bar eating a solo lunch when he notices a man decked out in hipster garb sitting next to him reading a copy of Frank O’Hara’s Meditations in an Emergency, a collection of O’Hara’s poetry originally published in 1957. “How is it?” Don asks him, trying to make a little conversation and prove he’s in on what’s ‘hip,’ too. “Makes you feel better about sitting in a bar at lunch. You feel like you’re getting something done.”

“Yeah,” the man chuckles derisively in response. “It’s all about getting things done.”

Don asks again, unfazed, “Is it good?”

“I don’t think you’d like it,” the man says with finality this time.
Don turns back to his food with a slightly dejected look on his face, but later in the same episode, we see Don reading his own copy of O’Hara’s book (hipsters be damned!). As we watch him package the book in an envelope addressed to an anonymous recipient\(^2\), taking the envelope to a mailbox down the street from his home in the Ossining suburbs, we hear a voiceover of Don moodily reciting the final stanzas of the collection’s last poem, “Mayakovsky”: “It may be the coldest day of / the year, what does he think of / that? I mean, what do I? and if I do, / perhaps I am myself again.”

Over the course of our journey, we have explored the different ways in which Don and his fellow mad men and women struggle to embrace themselves for who they are and where they’ve been in the face of all the external forces pressuring them to identify otherwise. A man is never simply whatever room he’s in (contrary to what Bert Cooper (Robert Morse) says in the season 1 episode “Nixon vs. Kennedy”), although, as we’ve discussed, a man (or woman) might try to rid themselves of the identity that doesn’t necessarily fit within the frame of what’s acceptable in any given room. O’Hara’s poems are famous for their portrayal of identity, or perhaps more accurately, the lack of one single identity, so when Don writes a note on the inside jacket of his copy of Meditations before sealing it in an envelope – “Made me think of you” – and signs off with an ambiguous “D,” we shouldn’t be surprised, nor should we be confused. Is this ‘D’ for Don or for Dick? Does Don even know? Perhaps the answers to these questions don’t matter because Don’s identity – his true, pure identity – exists somewhere between his experience and embodiment of the two. Most of the life we see Don living is a desperate attempt to separate himself from a part of himself he perceives to be less desirable. But at the same time, just like “Mayakovsky”’s narrator, he is waiting for these two identities to finally align – for the

\(^{2}\) We later find out the recipient is Anna Draper.
“catastrophe of his personality” to make sense – so he can experience life as one single self, and perhaps he can be himself again.

Recall the picture we painted in Chapter 1 of the season 6 premiere “The Doorway”: Don is sitting on a beach lounger in Hawaii, enthralled in a copy of Dante’s *Inferno*, oblivious to the raucous scene around him. We get the sense that, even though he is surrounded by people and activity, he feels blissfully alone with himself, free of the responsibilities that come with being Don Draper, and free of the looming ghost of Dick Whitman for the first time in five seasons. When Don makes his presentation to Royal Hawaiian back in the SCDP offices in New York after his stay at their hotel, he isn’t pitching the fun of a vacation; he’s pitching the transcendental experience of an escape:

“We’re not selling a geographical location, we’re selling an experience. It’s not just a different place, you are different. And you’d think there’d be an unsettling feeling about something so different, but there’s something else; you don’t miss anything, you’re not homesick. It puts you in this state. The air and the water are all the same temperature as your body. It’s sensory, the music, the fragrance, the breeze and the blue.” (S6: E1, “The Doorway”)

In paradise, there is no past, there is no future, there is simply *that moment*, free of the distractions and pressures posed by society. Don expects to miss something, to feel the twinge of longing for something more – for something that has passed, and the things that are yet to come – but sitting there on the beach, Don doesn’t feel restless. He doesn’t have to worry about who he is or where he is like the narrators in O’Hara’s poems so frequently do; he just *is*.

In the third and final chapter of our journey, we will aim to understand why *Mad Men*’s conclusion can truly be considered a conclusion. After spending seven seasons caught up in the
swirl of existential crisis after existential crisis, what is it about the series finale that makes it such a satisfying tying up of loose ends? In the series’ pilot, “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,” Don shows up to a presentation for Lucky Strike cigarettes empty handed; the brand and the product they’re selling no longer fit into the narrative of what American consumers want to buy\(^3\), and it’s up to Don to change that, but how? “Advertising is based on one thing: happiness,” Don begins. “And do you know what happiness is? Happiness is the smell of a new car. Happiness is freedom from fear. It is a billboard on the side of the road that screams with reassurance, ‘Whatever you are doing is okay. You are okay.’” It might take 92 episodes for the series to come full-circle, but when Don ascends to a state of enlightenment in the final episode, he does so by finally adopting the narrative he preaches in his presentations: advertising should be an avenue that opens minds, not closes doors, and embraces experiences the human experience as it exists, not for what it should be.

**The Cure for the Common Identity Crisis: Putting the ‘Ad’ Back in Advertising**

When SCDP catches wind that Honda, the Japanese motor company, is taking meetings with new advertising agencies in the season 4 episode “The Chrysanthemum and the Sword” (S4: E5, “The Chrysanthemum and the Sword”), all of the firm’s partners jump at the opportunity to win their agency’s first automobile (even if Honda was just a motorcycle company at the time) – all of the partners except Roger Sterling, that is. “Let me spare you the agony and the ecstasy and let you know we are *not* doing business with them,” Roger tells everyone gathered in the conference room to discuss the account. “Excuse me?” Pete Campbell responds, dumbfounded

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\(^3\) This scene is intended to take place in 1960, just after Reader’s Digest released an article condemning cigarettes as a threat to consumer health.
that Roger would want to turn down an opportunity to start a relationship with a company with as much potential as Honda. “Look, I don’t expect you to understand this because you were a little boy, but I used to be a man with a lot of friends,” Roger explains, “Then World War II came and they were all killed by your new yellow buddies.” Don and Joan sit quietly, staring at their hands in embarrassment; Pete looks enraged; Lane Price (Jared Harris) looks confused. When Roger eventually leaves the conference room though, the rest of the partners jump into action and end up deciding to arrange a meeting with Honda regardless of his hang-ups; the show must go on.

The team schedules a lunch meeting for Roger with one of their existing clients later in the week to keep him out of the office when the executives from Honda come to SCDP for a visit. But, just as the presentation is coming to a close, Roger returns from lunch unexpectedly, bursting into the conference room where the partners are holding their meeting with Honda. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know this meeting was happening, but then again I know some people like surprises,” Roger announces angrily.

“We’re almost done here,” Pete tells Roger in an attempt to keep him from saying anything further in front of the clients.

“I have to warn you,” Roger plows on, “they won’t know it’s over until you drop the big one – twice! We beat you and we’ll beat you again, and we don’t want any of your Jap crap.”

The Honda executives barely speak English and their translator refrains from relaying what Roger says, but by the end of the meeting it’s clear to everyone in the room that the account is DOA. Roger’s xenophobic outburst killed SCDP’s chances of winning Honda, all because of a war that had been fought almost an entire generation prior.
After Roger retreats back to his office, Don and Pete confront him about his behavior in the meeting. “It’s been almost twenty years, and whether you like it or not, the world has moved on,” Pete tells Roger. “These are not the same people.”

“How could that be?” Roger shouts. “I’m the same people!”

World War II was very real for Roger, who put his life on the line for his country and lost close friends in battle, but to young men like Pete, World War II, although remembered as a tragic event, has become a piece of national trivia. In season 7, we get a similar, although slightly more comic reaction to the younger generation’s opinion on the war when some of the creatives find a copy of “Scout’s Honor,” a cheesy comic strip series sketched by Lou Avery (Allan Havey), SCDPCGC’s new creative director, on the copy machine (S7: E5, “The Runaways”). Stan and Mathis think Lou’s cartoon is a hoot-and-a-half, but when Lou finds out the boys have been making fun of his drawings behind his back, he’s furious. “You’re a bunch of flag-burning snots,” Lou snarls at his team in a creative meeting. “You’ve got a thing to learn about patriotism and loyalty. The very fabric of ‘Scout’s Honor’ is a joke to you.” Maybe the younger generation truly does lack perspective as Roger and Lou suggest, in that they haven’t yet had to deal with the reality of war in their lifetime, but then again, maybe the younger generation has also found a way to write off the past out of necessity and keep their eyes fixed on progress.

From Nazi Car to Love Bug: How DDB Started a Creative Revolution

After Roger initially refuses to do business with Honda and storms out of the conference room, Pete lets out a huff. “If Bernbach can do business with Volkswagen, we can do this,” Pete
argues. Having been designed in part by Hitler himself alongside the Austrian car engineer Dr. Ferdinand Porsche, the Volkswagen bug (another casualty of WWII) came to be known as nothing less than a Nazi product, and it was one of the great ironies of advertising in the 1960s that Bill Bernbach of DDB – a notably Jewish agency that represented brands like El Al airlines and Levy’s Jewish Rye Bread – became responsible for advertising what many referred to at the time as “the Nazi car” (Frank, 67). In fact, DDB’s advertisements for Volkswagen in the Sixties have been considered some of the most memorable and revolutionary in advertising history. Once a symbol of mass society and “groupthink” at its worst, the Volkswagen bug became a hallmark of the 1960s counterculture, all largely thanks to DDB’s groundbreaking work on the brand. That by the end of the decade the Volkswagen had acquired an image that was considered “hip” rather than a product of Nazi engineering set DDB’s unique approach to advertising as the industry standard; perhaps advertising – an industry long considered to be a suffocating enforcer of traditional values and mainstream manipulation – didn’t have to be a pillar of groupthink and conformity. Perhaps it could be a vehicle for forward thinking and a champion for those whose ‘otherness’ had historically been considered a bad thing.

Bernbach, DDB’s creative director at the time, is often referenced as one of the founding fathers of the creative revolution in advertising in the 1960s, and, more specifically, his team’s campaign for Volkswagen in 1959 remains among the most analyzed, discussed and admired in the industry’s history. In an era stifled by science and narrow social roles, Bernbach discarded the idea that advertising should perpetuate cultural norms and started to challenge them, beginning not just with the products they pedaled, but with the lies Madison Avenue itself was selling to consumers. In the 1950s, advertising for the three big Detroit automakers was the stuff American dreams are made of; ads at the time highlighted the car’s aesthetic features that had
been designed to resemble the rockets and airplanes made popular during the Cold War, and invariably featured some combination of a manly husband, fawning wife and playful children (Frank, 61). Chevys, Fords and Buicks became the standard for success; to own one was to be a member of the American elite. The only problem was that there was always a newer and better model just around the corner. Americans were being advertised a model of success based on obsolescence. To continue to fit in meant constantly having to trade up and satisfy a new want regardless of whether it was actually a need.

Bernbach’s model for advertising the Volkswagen opposed its predecessors’ in almost every way. While many American automakers used photographic tricks to elongate cars, DDB found ways to make the Volkswagen look shorter and fatter; early Volkswagen ads were black and white with a minimalist appeal, while other car companies put their shiny chrome cars on spinning pedestals in the same frame as white, smiling faces; DDB’s ads were always organized around a pun or joke, a rare thing at the time, especially since the pun or joke usually mocked what the Volkswagen lacked rather than celebrating its strengths (Frank, 63). But perhaps the most interesting feature of their ads – and perhaps the reason for the campaign’s success – was that where most major autodealers were promoting obsolescence, Bernbach emphasized the car’s lack of highly visible change and mocked Detroit’s annual restyling sprees (Frank, 64).

In one ad, below the picture of the bug is a caption that says, “The ’51,’52, ’53, ’54, ’55, ’56, ’57, ’58, ’59, ’60, ’61 Volkswagen,” and in another displaying several years’ worth of minute changes made by the manufacturer, the copy makes the claim that each change was made no “to make it look different” but “only to make it work better.” There was just something about the way DDB’s Volkswagen ads spoke to consumers that was different from what they were used to. There wasn’t any shoptalk or auto jargon, and their ads didn’t make outlandish promises
of a better life. Bernbach’s team focused on selling their clients’ products to the ‘everyman’; in the Volkswagen universe, there’s no such thing as fitting in, and DDB was so bold as to pose the question: why would you want to?

**Embracing Denial**

DDB’s ads were among the first to call attention to what they were: ads. Volkswagen ads were famous for pointing out the flaws most Detroit automakers would try to paste over with retouched photograph, dream-world imagery and empty celebrity testimonials, and calling attention to Volkswagen as – like everyone else – a profit driven company: “since we have this burning desire to stay in business,” etc (Frank, 63). On occasion, DDB even invited readers into the ‘inner sanctum’ of Madison Avenue by admitting to their own advertising techniques in their ads; consumers aren’t stupid, so why should advertisers treat them like they are? The hallmark of DDB’s advertisements for Volkswagen rested on emphasizing the car’s curious shape, and after publishing so many ads repeating the same mantra, DDB produced one that asked consumers, “How much longer can we hand you this line?” Perhaps the DDB ad that has won the most recognition over the years and draws the most attention to its ‘ad-ness,’ though, isn’t even a Volkswagen ad.

In a 1970 spot for Alka-Seltzer, we see a man being served a plate of spaghetti and meatballs, exclaiming, “Mama mia! That’s a spicy meatball!” However, we realize we’re watching the filming of a television ad when the director yells ‘cut’ after the actor fumbles his lines again and again. The actor in the ad is plugging an absurd product, a brand of ready-made
meatballs that come in a jar; he is being filmed on an absurdly contrived set, with a doting Italian mother stereotype presenting him with the place of spaghetti; and he is reading his lines in an absurdly cheesy Italian accent which he promptly drops after each take. Advertising is absurd and this ad openly acknowledges it for its absurdity. By the end of the commercial, after performing numerous takes – and eating numerous meatballs – the ad suggests that the only thing that can relieve the actor of his heartburn and the viewers from further outtakes is Alka-Seltzer. By removing the jargon, lies and pure fantasy from the face of its ads, DDB presented an alternative to mainstream consumer culture; consumerism, like Alka-Seltzer, now promised to relieve Americans from their consuming excesses.

“The Agent that Frees”: *The Paradisiacal Power of Embracing the ‘Othered’ Self*

“You see this yet?” Salvatore Romano says, lifting up a copy of DDB’s infamous Volkswagen ‘Lemon’ ad to show Don. “I have,” Don says, unimpressed, “I don’t know what I hate about it the most, the ad or the car.”

“Remember, they did one last year? Same kind of smirk,” Harry Crane chimes in, “‘Think Small.’ It was a half-page ad on a full-page buy. You could barely see the product.”

“I don’t get it, Elvis just got back from West Germany – why not put him in it?” Paul Kinsey adds.

“They must be getting results,” Don admits, “They keep going back to the well.”

DDB’s work was different – subversive, even – but not ineffective. Although Don seems stumped by their off-color brand of genius, even he can’t deny that, whatever it is that DDB is doing, it’s working. One 1965 DDB print ad for Volkswagen depicts a suburban street lined with look-alike houses, no trees
and tiny shrubs – the standard of postwar order in America (Frank, 65). Parked in the driveway of each house, though, is a Volkswagen station wagon: “If the world looked like this, and you wanted to buy a car that sticks out a little,” the ad advises, “you probably wouldn’t buy a Volkswagen Station Wagon. But in case you haven’t noticed, the world doesn’t look like this. So if you’ve wanted to buy a car that sticks out a little, you know what to do” (Frank, 65-66). Bernbach’s work worked not because it aimed to suggest an alternate reality or present a desire to be someone you’re not; it aimed to free consumers from the ties that bound them to something they weren’t, whether that be suburbia or a deeper part of themselves.

**Finding Clarity in Exile**


> “Tripping from theatre to theatre living in Volkswagen buses tortured by self doubt tormented by anxiety fleeing in exile from the supermarkets the mortuaries and their factories with seventy high rising smokestacks their bugles their suffocations their immolations of souls who arrive in parking lot turn the key slam the door and surrender hope all who enter here.” (Julian Beck, “Living in Volkswagen Buses”)
By invoking the sign displayed above the gates of hell in Dante’s *Inferno* – “Abandon all hope yee who enter here” (Alighieri, 3.9) – Beck paints a dismal portrait of the country’s state in the mid-to-late 1960s; Americans were running in exile from the chains of conformity, but Volkswagen was advertising itself as the only car capable of driving fast enough away from the burning inferno of society’s “high rising smokestacks” and monotonous supermarket aisles akin to “mortuaries.” In response to the insidiously oppressive culture of America in the 1960s, the Volkswagen had become a symbol of non-conformity and a haven for individuality. DDB’s Volkswagen ads separated the brand from the sea of other big car companies in a way that made the little cars into a vehicle of escape rather than a comfortable means to justify a homogenous end. According to Nicholas Samstag, an advertising writer in the Sixties, “Marketing should be an emancipator. It should unlock locks and cut bonds by suggesting and implying, by hinting and beckoning, not by defining. It should be the agent that frees, not the agent that imprisons” (Frank, 93). DDB marketed the Volkswagen as the key to liberation, a force of freedom that promised to put distance between the consumer and conformity.

During the time Dante actually wrote the *Divine Comedy*, he was literally living in exile; to make a long story short, Dante became involved in the political life in Florence, which was separated into two groups at the time: The Guelphs and the Ghibellines. Dante became an ambassador for the city until he was caught in the middle of this factional war, and when he was sent to the pope in 1302, he was subsequently banned from returning to the city (Mazzotta, 4). In medieval culture, the inherent value of an individual depended on the position that individual occupied in the city (Mazzotta, 4). To hold no place within the city or to be without a city at all was to be nothing. And yet, it was in exile that Dante was most able to see what the problems with cities could be; the *Divine Comedy* became a story of how a man can go from perceiving the world in a partial, fragmentary frame to pulling that world together and seeing it in its totality. In exile, Dante started a project that aimed to find a possibility of unifying all the languages of Italy, he wrote a political text about the importance of unifying the world with the empire,
but the real process of unifying all of his experiences can only be found in the *Divine Comedy* (Mazzotta, 5).

When Don Draper is in Hawaii at the beginning of season 6, he is able to truly separate himself from the identity he has cultivated back on the mainland; he isn’t defined by his place in society, but rather by his experience within – and without – himself. By achieving distance from the confines that further confuse his identity, Don comes closer to discovering who he truly is. Recall how Don describes his experience in his pitch: “The air and the water are all the same temperature as your body. It’s sensory, the music, the fragrance, the breeze and the blue.” The way he experiences himself, both internally and externally, is unified. He is at rest. He simply *is* himself rather than scrambling to *be* someone else. Although Don’s life becomes complicated again almost immediately after he returns to New York, we see this version of Don at least one more time before the series’ end, and that’s in its final scene; sitting on a mountaintop in a canyon somewhere in California, Don peacefully ‘om’s’ with everyone in the group sitting around him, in a self-imposed exile from the orderly world he left on the East Coast. After seven seasons of searching, Don finally finds himself – both literally and metaphorically – in a place far, far away from Madison Avenue, and yet it is only after achieving this distance that he comes up with the idea for the “I’d Like to Buy the World a Coke” ad considered by many to be “the world’s most famous ad” (Andrews).

**Person to Person: ‘Other,’ But Not ‘Alone’**

In the third-to-last episode of *Mad Men*’s final season (S7: E12, “Lost Horizon”), Don leaves the office in the middle of a meeting. At this point in the series, SC&P has been absorbed by McCann Erickson, which means that, yes, Don is still a creative director, but he is now only one of many. Corporate life is proving to be rather stifling and ultimately confusing for Don, so when it comes time for

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4 Although Mad Men attributes the commercial’s creation to Don’s genius, it’s true author is Bill Backer, a former creative director at McCann Erickson when the ad took America by storm in 1971 (Andrews).
him to sit in on his first mass-creative meeting at McCann, he is less than thrilled by the direction he sees it taking – one that paints the consumer as a product to be sold instead of a human being longing for happiness and meaning (something Don himself has always identified with) – and decides to walk out. When he goes, he doesn’t leave much of a trace; all his secretary knows is that he was supposed to pick up his daughter early from school, but after several days without a single Don sighting, it’s clear he didn’t end up where he said he was going to be. In the next two episodes of the season (and the last of the show), we follow Don on a lengthy cross-country road trip, at first in search of a woman he had been romantically courting, and then on a journey of his own. After being beaten and mugged by veterans in the mid-west and giving his car away to an unfortunate teenager, Don ends up in California at Anna Draper’s house, which – since Anna died in season 4 – is now inhabited by her niece, Stephanie (Caity Lotz). Since Don doesn’t really have any plans for himself, Stephanie convinces Don to accompany her to a retreat in the canyon where we find Don is the show’s final scene.

During one of the seminars at the retreat, Stephanie ends up storming out in tears, and the next morning when Don wakes up, she isn’t in her bed and her bag is gone. Once Don realizes she’s left the retreat early and left him without a car, Don asks one of the retreat coordinators if there’s any other way for him to get home. He could hitch, she says, but he’ll probably just be standing there all day – he can thank Charlie Manson for that. Don gives up and accepts he’s going to be stuck there for a while, so he decides to step outside and make a phone call. Peggy (back at McCann) picks up. She’s angry he’s been gone so long, but encourages him to come back. “I messed everything up,” Don says, straining to hold back tears. “I’m not the man you think I am.” Peggy and Don have shared some truly heartfelt moments and Don was the only one who actually came to visit Peggy in the hospital after she had her baby in season 1, but Peggy still hasn’t seen Don’s other side. When Don says this, Peggy starts to panic. After all, she has her mentor and missing boss on the line after weeks of not hearing a word from him, and she doesn’t want him to hang up and do anything rash.
“Don, you listen to me,” she says sternly through her own welling eyes. “What did you ever do that was so bad?”

“I broke all my vows,” Don says, “I scandalized my child, I took another man’s name and made nothing of it.”

When Don tells her he only called because he realized he forgot to say goodbye, Peggy starts to protest, but Don hangs up before she can say anything else.

A few moments – or could it have been hours? – after Don hangs up the phone, a woman finds Don crumpled on the ground next to the payphone, staring at the ground blankly. In an effort to coax him out of his current state, the woman asks Don to come to her next seminar with her. Don agrees, although not enthusiastically, and walks to the next location where everyone is sitting in a circle. When the group’s leader asks for another volunteer to come sit next to him and tell their story, the woman Don came with looks at Don expectantly, but instead, an average-looking man wearing a light-blue sweater and grey trousers walks over and sits down in the empty chair. “I’m Leonard,” he says to emphatic nods from everyone in the room. “I’ve never been interesting to anybody. I work in an office. People walk right by me; I know they don’t see me. I go home, and I watch my wife and my kids, but they don’t look up when I sit down. It’s like no one cares that I’m gone.” At this, Don suddenly looks up from where he’s been staring blankly, adjusting himself in his seat. Leonard continues:

“They should love me – maybe they do, but I don’t even know what it is. You spend your whole life thinking you’re not getting it, people aren’t giving it to you, then you realize they’re trying, but you don’t even know it is.

“I had a dream that I was on a shelf in the refrigerator. Someone closes the door and the light goes off. And I know everybody’s out there eating. And then they open the door and you see them smiling and they’re happy to see you, but maybe they don’t look right at you, and maybe they don’t pick you. And then the door closes again, and the light goes off.” (S7: E14, “Person to Person”)
Rather than returning to his seat, Leonard breaks down crying. Don jumps up and slowly walks over to Leonard, where he kneels down to embrace him.

![Figure 13: Don finds himself reflected in Leonard's story in the series finale. (AMC, 2015)](image)

In this embrace, there is both an offer of comfort and a desperate attempt to claim something lost. Don has lived a full life (or at least half of one as he’s still only in his mid-forties) and traveled across the country in search of it. Don doesn’t find it in another woman, he doesn’t find it at a new job, and he doesn’t find it at the bottom of a bottle. Where he finally finds it is in the embrace of a stranger who shares his same sense of alienation and isolation within his own self. In Weiner’s only interview after the Mad Men season finale, he says he wanted Don’s moment of acceptance to be one he shares with another person as a wordless acknowledgement of their mutual loneliness; “I hoped the audience would feel either that he was embracing a part of himself, or maybe them, and that they were heard,” Weiner tells A.M. Homes, the evening’s moderator. “I liked the idea where he’d come to this place and it’d be about other people and a moment of recognition.” When Don finds peace in Hawaii, he does so in a way that makes him feel unified within himself, but also distances him from the people he spends his vacation surrounded by; Don’s facial expression betrays the same aura of detachment when he watches a slideshow of pictures
from he and Megan’s trip as when he watched his wife hula dance onstage from their table at one of the hotel’s grand luaus, and when he actually does seem to engage with someone on the trip – a soldier he meets in a bar whose wedding he agrees to attend the next morning – it’s with a stranger. In the series finale though, Don takes a break from his dyspeptic tendencies and externalizes his sense of self, only to find it reflected in Leonard’s narrative. “We believe right away [Leonard’s] invisible,” Weiner says (New York Public Library). “The alienation that was created by success, political, racial tension, the technology… [People were bound] to crack.”

### Where Do We Go From Here?

When Don finally does crack, though, instead of letting it further shatter his internal sense of self, he uses it as an opportunity to rebuild it. Don realizes that, regardless of who they are and where they’re going, every person shares the story of where they’ve been. The 1960s was a decade of repression and an ensuing call for change; how can we embrace where we’re going if we deny where we’ve been? Racism, sexism, and homophobia ran rampant because society refused to acknowledge the existence of the ‘other’ – divergent lifestyles and stories that existed in and before a time when conformity reigned sovereign – as a part of the larger human experience. Right before the final episode’s credits roll, it’s revealed that Don – after returning from the retreat – goes on to create one of the most memorable Coca-Cola campaigns in history; standing together on a grassy mountaintop are young people of all genders and ethnicities holding Coke bottles, and singing:

“I’d like to buy the world a home and furnish it with love,
grow apple trees and honey bees and snow-white turtle doves.
I’d like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony,
I’d like to buy the world a Coke and keep it company.” (Andrews)

If we were to imagine Don’s pitch, he would probably say that buying a bottle of Coke is about more than satisfying a physical thirst; it’s about satisfying our emotional thirst to be a part of something bigger. A movement, a moment, an experience. Humanity is diverse, but our desire to be a part of its larger picture – its history – is the same. When you buy a Coke, you aren’t just buying it for yourself. You’re buying it for the world.

Figure 14: Don meditates peacefully on a hilltop in the Mad Men series finale. (AMC, 2015)

The idea comes to Don (or so we are lead to assume) when he himself is sitting on the grassy mountaintop at the retreat. The sun is shining gloriously as the camera pans across the peaceful faces of each of the people meditating on the hilltop until it lands on Don. This must be paradise, a place where one can sit at peace with the others around them. A bell chimes. The meditation leader speaks. “The lives we’ve led, and the lives we’ve yet to lead.” Ding. A series of synchronized ‘ohms.’ “A new day, new ideas, a new you.” Ding. In the final episode, we see
Joan relinquish her post as a glorified secretary and start her own production business; we see Pete repair his marriage to Trudy and leave his mistakes behind in New York to start a new life in the Midwest; we see Peggy confidently strut down the McCann hallways to her own office and admit her love for Stan; we see Betty and Sally settle their relationship after Betty finds out she has highly advanced lung cancer. Going forward, the characters on *Mad Men* will see a new America emerge from the one they have left behind, but they will also have to cope with their pasts and how these will affect their individual futures. We live in a mad, mad world, but we are not alone. The road to peace is often shrouded in darkness and peril, but it’s how we rise from the shards of our battered selves and piece them back together again that defines the shape of our own personal mount of joy when we finally reach it.
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Thesis Title: “The Catastrophe of My Personality”: “Mad Men” and the Crisis of the Separate Self

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Work Experience:
Lippincott Massie McQuilkin Literary Agents, Intern
Summer 2016, New York, NY
- Helped manage unsolicited query submissions and provide detailed reader reports, in addition to working with individual agents on projects from existing and recommended clients
- Completed administrative tasks including scanning, filing, mailing and bank runs

Ayesha Pande Literary, Intern
Summer 2016, New York, NY
- Evaluated and reported back on queries and manuscripts, in addition to providing feedback on upcoming work from existing clients
- Worked closely with agency’s small team on individualized projects including researching editors and composing a social media ‘how-to’ for YA authors

State College Magazine, Intern
Spring 2016, New York, NY
- Wrote several bylined features and profiles, including one of the website’s most-visited articles of the year
- Completed tasks such as fact checking and assisting the editor-in-chief with research

Center for the Performing Arts, Intern
Fall 2015, University Park, PA
- Attended bi-weekly unit meetings, assisted with pre-performance programming, researched and reported on project related to program and audience development

GreenGale Publishing, **Intern**  
Summer 2015, New York, NY  
- Wrote numerous bylined culture pieces for company’s top-grossing publication, Hamptons Magazine  
- Conducted extensive research on upcoming events, notable locals and public figures

Town & Gown Magazine, **Intern**  
Fall 2014, State College, PA  
- Conducted interviews with and wrote bylined features about Penn State faculty, students and State College community members and businesses  
- Fact-checked, transcribed interviews, copy-edited proofs before publication

Townsquare Media, **Intern**  
Summer 2014, Binghamton, NY  
- Worked for company’s events director to produce two large-scale promotional events  
- Interned with company’s #1 radio station as social media intern and blogger

**Extracurricular Experience:**

Valley Magazine, **Editor-in-Chief**  
Spring 2014-Spring 2016, Penn State University  
- Lead group of over 60 students in producing and distributing the Spring ’16 issue of Penn State’s only entirely student-run life and style publication  
- Promoted to editor-in-chief position after only three semesters on staff, where I became responsible for organizing weekly staff meetings, delegating articles to and maintaining communication with the staff, and acting as a liaison between magazine’s business staff, design team and editorial staff, as well as local businesses and other campus organizations

Schreyer Career Mentor, **Mentor**  
Fall 2015-Spring 2016, Penn State University  
- Mentored two students in Schreyer Honors College  
- Attended monthly career information sessions, introduced mentees to career services and advisors on campus, held office hours to answer resume questions, edit cover letter and advise on different class options within English major

Ed2010, **Member**  
Spring 2014-Fall 2015, Penn State University  
- Attended bi-weekly meetings as member of university’s chapter of the networking and career-building site’s student community
Grants Received:

Virginia Todd Chapel Executive Internship Program
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Presentations:

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