

INTRODUCTION

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The AMC television series, *Mad Men*, takes its viewers on an emotional, psychological, and sociological roller coaster ride in the setting of New York City. The years depicted span March 1960 through either the autumn 1970 or winter 1971—depending upon one’s interpretation of the Coca-Cola advertisement, an ad that first aired on radio on February 12, 1971. Created by Matthew Weiner, *Mad Men* develops and follows the lives of Donald Draper/Dick Whitman, Peggy Olson, Joan Holloway/Harris, Roger Sterling, Pete Campbell, Megan Calvet/Draper, Betty Draper/Francis, and Sally Draper as they negotiate careers, love and marriage, and dramatic social and political change. This collection helps readers navigate the exciting roller coaster ride that is *Mad Men*, through exploring unknown depths of its characters and storylines. After enjoying the ride of watching all seven seasons of *Mad Men*, we hope that you take pleasure in the ride of reading ‘*The Universe Is Indifferent*’: *Theology, Philosophy, and Mad Men*.

“THE UNIVERSE IS INDIFFERENT”?

In Season 1, Don receives a bonus check in the amount of \$2,500 and brings it to his mistress’s apartment with the hopes of inviting her to join him on a trip to Paris. He finds her relaxing with a group of marijuana-smoking friends markedly different from his colleagues on Madison Avenue. These friends engage with Don about the vices of his work and conclude, “You make the lie. You invent want. You’re for them, not us.” Don responds with an equal amount of clarity: “I hate to break it to you, but there is no big lie.

There is no system. The universe is indifferent.” His mistress rises and comes to Don, and he again invites her to Paris. She claims that she cannot go with him; he signs his bonus check, puts it in her brassiere, and tells her to buy a car. Don turns to leave, but one of her friends gives Don a warning: “There are cops. You can’t go out there.” Don responds without hesitation, “No, *you* can’t.”

These beatniks remain critical toward power and society but not nihilistic about potential change within the world. Don claims that their criticism has no object: how does one “bring the man” down when “the man” does not exist? Their protests remain directed toward a ghost, a phantom. For them, Don *is* the face of this ghost—this phantom. But that becomes too easy of a target. Don cannot be the face of “the man” because there is no “man” for them to bring down and critique. The claim, “the universe is indifferent,” is not only an existentialist claim—because it means that we must create meaning for ourselves—but also a nihilistic claim in the sense that nothingness has as much power and sway as the meaning we make.

According to the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, we can distinguish between two forms of nihilism: (a) “Incomplete nihilism does indeed replace the former values with others, but it still posits the latter always in the old position of authority that is, as it were, gratuitously maintained as the ideal realm of the suprasensory”; (b) “Complete nihilism, however, must in addition do away even with the place of value itself, with the suprasensory as a realm, and accordingly must posit and revalue values differently.”¹ Which version of nihilism fits the world of *Mad Men* better remains up to the judgment of the viewer, but we certainly hope that this collection informs the question in helpful and interesting ways.

CHAPTER PREVIEWS

This book contains seventeen chapters divided into three sections. While the subject matters of the chapters have a decidedly socio-historical focus, the authors use basic topics as starting points for philosophical, religious, and theological reflections. *Mad Men* reveals deep truths concerning the social trends of the 1960s and early 1970s in American life. Because of this, *Mad Men* deserves a significant amount of reflection from philosophical, religious, and theological perspectives. Some of the chapters go beyond mere reflection and make deeper inquiries into what these trends say about American cultural habits, the business world within Western capitalism,

1. Heidegger, “The Word of Nietzsche,” 69.

and the rapid social changes (gender, race, and sexuality) during this period. In what follows, we provide brief previews of each chapter.

Part 1 is ordered from general-to-particular-topics, with its bookends as two different perspectives on identity and work. In “‘It’s the Real Thing’: Identity and Sincerity in *Mad Men*,” Howard Pickett addresses both ethical and unethical business practices found in *Mad Men*. Pickett claims that the series, itself, represents what he calls a narrative ethic: a storyline, plot twists, and character development. All of these elements allow businesses in the real world to assess their own ethical approaches. Throughout *Mad Men*, we find a close connection between advertising, deception, and lying. Surprisingly, Don Draper refuses the temptation to lie in relation to his client, Lucky Strikes. The ambiguity of Don’s character comes into play in the sense that while he is a liar (he consistently lies to those closest to him: Betty, Megan, and his children), *Mad Men* raises philosophical questions concerning authenticity, sincerity, and truth—especially in relation to Don’s identity. Additionally, Pickett observes that *Mad Men* connects sex to selling, religion to retail. These connections play out in multiple advertisements produced throughout the series. Pickett claims that we need to maintain distinctions between *public* and *private* sincerity in order to establish healthy and moral business practices within the real world.

Jennifer Phillips begins her chapter by distinguishing between artists, businesspersons, and creative workers. In “The Business of Creativity: From SCDP to the Modern Creative Enterprise,” Phillips describes the ways in which creative workers find inspiration. Places of inspiration come from the internal, through the production of ideas, or the external, for sake of awards and profits. Phillips argues that it is more virtuous to find inspiration inwardly, through the production of ideas. Creative workers need freedom and flexibility in order to express themselves. Business people need to manage their creative workers by allowing them flexibility with hours, lots of paid vacation, and promotions relating to the common good. Phillips concludes by claiming that our social responsibility concerns promoting advertising for the sake of the common good—which involves avoiding advertisements and business practices that harms or objectifies people.

Sarah Conrad Sours highlights the theme of courtesy found throughout *Mad Men*. In her chapter, “Mad Manners: Courtesy, Conflict, and Social Change,” Sours shows how courtesy takes on different purposes; for instance, Peggy’s acts of courtesy are connected to her genuine moral character whereas Pete’s acts of courtesy come across as insincere and manipulative. Courtesy plays a role in power dynamics, perpetuating the socially constructed authorities. Wealthy white men carry the most power, which becomes evident in their relationships with women and people of

color. White men have the freedom to make sexual comments and gestures toward the women in the office, asking crass personal questions—questions the women would never dream of asking the men. The few African-American characters in this series always act with courtesy but rarely receive much courtesy in return. The two African-American secretaries know all of the names of the employees and refer to them with their proper titles—courteous acts that are never reciprocated. The more powerful party bends the rules of social courtesy, while the weaker parties adhere to courtesy at all costs. Courtesy becomes a way for characters to navigate social relationships in their professional and personal lives.

In “All the Research Points to the Fact that Mothers Feel Guilty’: Maternal Desire and the Social Construction of Motherhood in *Mad Men*,” Ann W. Duncan explores the confluence of maternal desire, societal paradigms of motherhood and vocation in the lives of Betty Draper/Harris, Peggy Olson and Joan Holloway/Harris. As a societal construction mediated by the often-conflicting maternal desire, career ambition and quest for personal fulfillment, motherhood finds expression in dramatically different ways in the characters of *Mad Men*. Through attention to theories of motherhood and feminism through the twentieth century, Duncan’s chapter examines these three women as a lens through which to understand the complexities of motherhood in the contemporary age. Such an examination reveals that these character’s stories are both deeply conditioned by their historical context and directly relevant to contemporary discourse about motherhood and feminism.

In “Supporting this World’s Ballerinas’: Learning from *Mad Men*’s Female Workers,” Kristen Deede Johnson focuses on the question of women’s ability to pursue their dreams—both professionally and personally—through the lens of a theology of the home. Throughout *Mad Men*, women struggle to balance their personal and professional lives. Megan achieves her professional dream as an actress, but her marriage crumbles into divorce. Betty achieves her dream of marriage, children, and a home in the suburbs but gives up her professional dream as a model. Peggy achieves her professional dream of being a copywriter but foregoes motherhood by giving up her own child up for adoption. Joan succeeds within the firm, but her marriage also ends in divorce and she then regrets how much she relies on her own mother for childcare for her son. What is the response, perhaps the solution, to these tragic conflicts between professional careers and home economics? Somewhat counter-intuitively, Johnson claims that a Christian theology of the home contributes to a positive perception of housework. If housework becomes significant enough to acquire God’s attention, as detailed in the Bible, then it deserves our human attention. Humans have

certain limitations and the repetitive tasks of care-giving and domestic work serve as moments of “holy leisure.”

In “If I Don’t Go In that Office Everyday, then Who am I?: Culture, Identity, and Work in *Mad Men*,” David Matzko McCarthy argues that the shift from Dick Whitman to Don Draper comes strictly through the process of Don defining his identity in terms of he who is at work. McCarthy claims that the only “constancy” Draper has in his life concerns his role at work while several other relationships—family members, friends, mistresses, and even his sibling—fade away. While Don works, he operates as an artist: not the Romantic sense of artist, but in terms of being patient and concerned with getting it “right.” He allows time for ideas to form and forces bad ideas onto neither clients nor colleagues. Don also operates as a craftsman. A craftsman differs from an artist because a craftsman identifies with a particular community. Don finds that his community depends upon him, but he relies on them as well. Throughout *Mad Men*, Don searches for authentic community, cultural unity, and an overall sense of belonging.

McCarthy’s chapter provides an ideal transition from the section “Business Ethics” to the section “Who Is Don Draper?” Originally, we planned for Part 2 to contain studies of multiple characters within *Mad Men*; as it happens in the storylines of *Mad Men*, however, it all comes back to Don! Once we recognized that we had five chapters—counting neither McCarthy’s nor Goodson’s chapter as part of the five—reflecting upon Don’s character, we did what Don would expect us to do: we gave him his own section. Part 2 contains five chapters: the first two chapters are explicitly theological in the sense that they employ religious or theological scholarship to understand Don’s character and how Don gets perceived by others; the next three chapters are more philosophical in the sense that they employ arguments and sources from the canon of Western philosophy.

In “Countercultural Beatrices?: Don Meets Dante,” Gabriel Haley uses Dante’s *Inferno* as a lens through which to view Don’s actions and moral progress. First, Haley discusses the role of Beatrice in Dante’s account; Beatrice symbolizes love as a physical presence and a spiritual guide. According to Haley, Megan represents Beatrice for Don in *Mad Men* by taking on an identity of the other and surprising Don with both countercultural and counterintuitive actions. Secondly, Haley explains the notion of how properly ordered desire leads to moral progress within Dante’s writing. Though Megan represents Beatrice, Haley argues that Don displays a disordered desire for Megan—which inhibits the moral progress of Don’s character. Haley suggests, however, that the lighthearted tone at the end of the series reflects the potential for Don’s moral progress: Don’s willingness to be part of the

“counterculture” and to confess his past mistakes, prepares him for healthier relationships in the future.

In “Moving Forward’ as Return: The Redemptive Journey of Don Draper,” Jackson Lashier addresses the duplicity of Don Draper’s life: false self vs. true self. Relying on categories from Thomas Merton’s theology, Lashier connects living in the false self to being in exile. The Israelites experienced exile as a result of their failure to live faithfully into their covenant with God. As a displacement from one’s homeland, the Israelites experienced exile as being displaced from the promise land; exile, however, also refers to not being who you were created to be. Draper lives in a place of “false self,” which leads to a feeling of emptiness like a never-ending meaningless carousel ride. Lashier argues that the way out of exile, ironically, involves death. This death is not literal death but a metaphorical death—death to the “false self.” Draper needs to die to his “false self” in order to start over. Through multiple storylines, we gain a glimpse of Draper dying to his unrelenting desire to start over and then begin to embrace his “true self”—an authentic self.

Engaging the existentialist philosophies of Soren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger, Seth Vannatta provides the strongest conceptual description for what we mean by the title of the book: “*The Universe Is Indifferent.*” In his chapter, “You Are Okay’: Don’s Despair and our Road to Recovery,” Vannatta treats Don’s character on the terms of Heidegger’s nihilistic existentialism vs. Kierkegaard’s Christian existentialism. Kierkegaard calls for passionate action whereas Heidegger calls for authenticity. In order for Don to find authenticity, according to Kierkegaard, he must reject the world and begin to embrace his inner self. Through a Heideggerian lens, Vannatta demonstrates that Don can achieve authenticity only through modifying his anonymous modes of existence. Don must recover himself by resisting anxiety and despair. Vannatta suggests that anxiety, in fact, awakens Don from his slumber and causes him to feel uncanny and not-at-home-in-the-world. For Kierkegaard, the road to recovery involves a road that turns away from despair and turns towards faith. For Heidegger, self-recovery remains grounded in Don’s actions and his anticipation of the future.

Nsenga K. Burton, in her chapter “Don Draper, Double Consciousness and the Invisibility of Blackness?” employs W. E. B. DuBois’s notion of “double consciousness” to explore the multiplicity of Don’s character as well as the representation of racial, class and religious minorities throughout the series. In so doing, Burton unsettles a frequent critique of the show—that it fails to address race in any substantial way. Burton argues that the series addresses race alongside many markers of identity and social change tackled throughout the seven seasons by exploring Don’s complicated relationship

to his own whiteness. His hidden identity and early experience of poverty mark him as an “other” or an outsider in ways similar to other characters marked by their race, gender, ethnicity or religion. In this way, Burton argues, Don is coded as a black man and much of his existential struggle can be explained through this lens. The “myth of whiteness” evident in Don’s character parallels the myth of the non-racial narrative of the series.

In “The Erotic Reduction of Don Draper: Iconicity, Idolatry, and Madness,” Carole Baker explains and utilizes Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenology of the erotic. Marion’s philosophy offers a way to reflect upon Don’s character, within both personal and professional contexts, in terms of “icon” and “idol.” Baker interprets the title, *Mad Men*, as suggestive of a philosophy of “madness”—revealing the connections between idolatry and madness. We, as viewers, recognize the fictional nature of Draper’s character even as we recognize the very real aspects of his character. The realism within this paradoxical man invites the viewer to moral judgment and reflection. Through application of elements of the erotic reduction to *Mad Men*’s leading man, Baker explores the paradoxical nature of the phenomenology of love.

Part 3 addresses topics relating to politics and social theory: marriage, parenting, political identity, and the role of religion in individual and public life. Part 3 begins with Jacob L. Goodson’s “*Zou Bisou Bisou: Feminist Theory and Sexual Ethics in Mad Men*” as a transition from Don’s character (Part 2) to the social impact of feminism on sexuality within marriage. Goodson navigates the sexual aspects of Don’s marriages to both Betty and Megan. Goodson makes a case for viewing *Mad Men* through the philosophical lenses of Immanuel Kant’s deontological sexual ethics, Simone de Beauvoir’s existentialist-feminist theory of sex and sexuality, and Catherine MacKinnon’s radical feminist sexual ethics. Doing so helps to reveal the empowerment experienced by Betty and Megan through the sexual aspects of their marriage to Don.

While Goodson merely suggests the significance of ordinary life for understanding marriage, Brandon Morgan and Jonathan Tran take the next step and establish the full significance of the connections between marriage and ordinary life. In their chapter, “*Exitus et Reditus in Marriage: Mad Men vs. Hollywood Remarriage Comedies*,” Morgan and Tran look to the work of Stanley Cavell to make sense of the significance of ordinary life for sustaining marriage. As their sub-title suggests, they compare and contrast *Mad Men* with the genre of “Hollywood remarriage comedies”—a genre carefully studied by Cavell.

In their chapter, “*Uneasy Bedfellows: On Pete and Trudy’s Marriage*,” Matthew Emile Vaughan and Christopher J. Ashley guide the reader through Pete and Trudy’s rocky relationship from the first through the

seventh seasons of *Mad Men*. Pete Campbell comes from old money and feels entitled to his position and status. Although Trudy's character is less developed than Pete's, we know that she represents new money and she takes on the role of Pete's ethical surrogate throughout the series. Pete's desire for leadership and power carries over into his marriage with Trudy. Pete wants to be in charge, but Trudy wants to an equal partnership. Pete and Trudy's marriage encompasses both hardship and success. For viewers who consider themselves as part of the millennial generation, Pete and Trudy's marriage represents the ways of their grandparents' marriage. As a result of seeing the hardships of their grandparents' marriage, millennials now tend to wait until their late twenties or early thirties to get married and have kids.

Power and sex are two key themes that saturate *Mad Men*. This leaves children on the margins throughout the series. In her chapter, "Mad Men, Bad Parents: Representations of Parenting in *Mad Men*," Susan Frekko addresses the themes of parenting found in Betty's and Don's parenting styles. Frekko emphasizes both the adult-centric and neoliberal contexts in which Sally and Bobby are raised. Responsibility and self-regulation become the two highest values of neoliberal parenting. Betty fails to show responsibility and self-regulation through her addiction to cigarettes and vain concerns about her appearance. While Don tends to show some restraint when it comes to punishing the children, he has his own addictions to alcohol and sex—as well as his habitual tendencies to deceive and lie. Frekko argues that viewers see these failings and are invited to develop feelings of superiority to the characters on *Mad Men*. Gender equality, racial equality, and bad parenting are not yet behind us; society must continue to work for a positive change in all three of these areas.

In "I Can't Believe that's the Way God Is': Peggy's Pre-Vatican II Catholicism," Heidi Schlumpf begins with Season 2 of *Mad Men*—in the midst of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the threat of the end of the world. Characters find their escape in multiple ways, but Peggy—in particular—goes to church. She finds herself in a pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church—which displays a traditional view of women, an emphasis on the sins of sex and sexuality, and a strict hierarchical structure. Peggy rebels against the Roman Catholic view of womanhood by taking birth control and having sex outside of marriage. At her job, Peggy encounters the secular culture and quickly realizes that both the secular view of womanhood and the Christian view of womanhood remain necessarily connected to female sexuality. Peggy obtains an illusion of respect from Gill, the young Catholic priest, when Gill asks for her advice on his sermons and asks for her help with a promotional flyer. Gill, however, refuses to fully support her decisions

concerning the flyer. Eventually, Peggy stands up for herself and seemingly walks away from the Roman Catholic Church.

Jared D. Larson's chapter, "We Don't Really Know What's Going On': *Mad Men* as a Bellwether of the Politics to Come," brings the collection to a strong conclusion. As the sub-title suggests, Larson connects the political problems of the 1960s to the current (2000s) political problems of the United States of America. Arguing that we never learn from our mistakes, Larson shows how American politics continues to struggle with issues of race, gender, capitalism, nationalism, and political identity. In the first two seasons of *Mad Men*, the threat of the Cuban Missile attack and nuclear war with the Soviets propelled many citizens and politicians into fear. This fear was paired with a polarization between America and foreign countries. The presidential campaign between Nixon and Kennedy established a new connection between Presidential Campaigns and advertising agencies. *Mad Men* also shows the level of privilege held by some people in society: in the 1960s, police officers favor white, wealthy, men; in the 2000s, this favoritism remains. Lastly, Larson connects politics and big business during the 1960s, the nascent years of the now omnipotent military-industrial complex. Not much has changed in our current government: America remains run by fear with strict polarization, certain privileges, and the end goal of making money. One possible solution to these problems, offered by Larson, concerns how more television series—in the model of *Mad Men*—ought to be produced allowing its audiences to reflect more deeply upon the past, present, and future.

This reflection upon the past, present, and future, hopefully manifests throughout this entire collection. While multiple volumes could be authored to address the internal plot twists and character development alone, our understandings of the show itself are only deepened by connections to happenings in our past and present reality. Whether in relation to gender, race, business ethics, personal morality, or marriage, our reactions to the seemingly outdated social mores and paradigms represented in this series reveal both how far we have come and how deeply entrenched our own existential struggles, moral quandaries and deep seated anxieties lie. This reflectivity makes *Mad Men* a classic for this generation and one that viewers watch again and again. We hope this collection will only enhance the joy, amusement, disgust, and reflection that experience entails.

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