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## Indecent Proposals: A Historical Reading of Sexual Politics in *Mad Men*

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### ABSTRACT

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*Mad Men* (AMC 2007–), a critically acclaimed television series set in the midst of the prosperous New York advertising industry during the early to mid-1960s, often explores the psychological, romantic, and work-related implications of conflicting identities. This project focuses on how *Mad Men* constructs the workplace and sexual identities of two of its secondary characters, Sal Salvatore, the Italian-American and closeted homosexual Art Director of *Mad Men*'s fictional advertising agency, and Joan Harris, a white, heterosexual woman who heads the agency's secretarial pool for most of the series. Both Sal and Joan experience workplace sexual propositioning from important clients during the series, but the outcomes of their individual situations are vastly different. This article compares Sal and Joan's situations in order to explore how *Mad Men* considers and values male homosexuality and active female sexuality in the context of both 1960s and contemporary social mores.

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### KEYWORDS

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historical representation, *Mad Men*, sexual politics, sexual propositioning, television fiction

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Approximately seven years have passed since *Mad Men* (AMC 2007-) joined the ranks of television shows contributing to the critically dubbed second coming of TV's Golden Age. Predominant critical opinion cites *The Sopranos* (HBO 1999-2007) as the fundamental source of TV's cultural renaissance, but indicates shows like *The Wire* (HBO 2002-2008), *30 Rock* (NBC 2006-2013), *Breaking Bad* (AMC 2008-2013), *The Walking Dead* (AMC 2010-), *Homeland* (Showtime 2011-), and *Mad Men* as evidence of television's current status as the medium of quality today: "We are living in good TV times. No longer is it easy to insult television as the 'idiot box.' With more channels and more choices, there are also more creative voices being heard" (Leopald 2013). *Mad Men* holds a pivotal role among contemporary television's critical darlings because its success marked a significant merging of premium television and basic cable. *Mad Men* created and cemented AMC's standing as a major player among quality television outlets like HBO and Showtime, and its success led the way for more serial television shows like *Breaking Bad* and *Downton Abbey* to air on basic television networks.

Coincidentally, *Mad Men*'s fictional universe recollects the mid-1950s and early 1960s, an era that ushered in TV's first Golden Age with critically acclaimed series like *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964) and live dramatic anthologies like *Kraft Television Theatre* (1947-1958). Given *Mad Men*'s rampant popularity, it seems almost superfluous to recount the show's plot and historical framework. However, a brief refresher is necessary when analyzing any narrative.

*Mad Men* is an American period drama television series, created and produced by Matthew Weiner, set in 1960s New York. The series' seventh and final season will air in two parts in April 2014 and 2015. Much of *Mad Men*'s narrative follows the personal and professional lives of the "mad" men and women working at the fictional Madison Avenue advertising agency Sterling Cooper (which later grows to become Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce, and even later morphs into Sterling Cooper & Partners). The show also devotes plenty of screen-time to the spouses and families of the (often voluntarily) overworked and emotionally absent men and women of Madison Avenue. While the series is famous for its impeccable style—gorgeous period clothing, a contemporaneous soundtrack, meticulously

orchestrated sets, et cetera—*Mad Men*'s glamorous mise-en-scene is not all the show has to offer its twenty-first century viewers. Peeling back *Mad Men*'s surface style reveals how the show explores issues of sexuality and gender, especially when the public and private lives of Sterling Cooper's employees collide.

At its core, *Mad Men* is a series about conflicting identities. The most obvious manifestation of this theme is the series' protagonist, Don Draper. Through flashbacks, we discover that the counterpart to Don's public persona of successful and suave advertising man is Dick Whitman, the illegitimate son of an alcoholic father and young prostitute. Viewers learn that while serving in the Korean War, Dick secretly steals the identity of Lieutenant Donald Draper, whose body is rendered unrecognizable in a fatal accident. Dick—now, Don—builds his life from the bottom-up after the war, utilizing his stolen identity to climb the corporate ladder toward the apex of the advertising world. The destructive effects of Don's stolen identity resonate throughout the series, even after his secret is exposed to his romantic partners and coworkers: "...negating his connection to the past and to family, Don lives an 'as if' life that lacks the scaffolding of the actual...Don loses Dick and thereby loses contact with his own humanity" (Slochower 385). However, trauma originating from conflicting identities is certainly not limited to Don's character. *Mad Men* recurrently emphasizes the troubling consequences of merging work lives and sex lives through workplace sexual propositionings.

While the character Don Draper has garnered a great deal of critical attention, this project focuses on two of *Mad Men*'s supporting characters, Salvatore "Sal" Romano and Joan Harris. Although these characters may not have much in common at first glance—Sal is a closeted homosexual Italian-American man working as Sterling Cooper's Art Director and Joan is a white heterosexual woman who heads the office's secretarial pool for a greater part of the series—both experience workplace sexual propositioning from important clients. *Mad Men* explores Sal and Joan's conflicting identities through workplace propositioning. Comparing how Don reacts to their individual situations reveals how *Mad Men* imagines 1960s sexual politics.

In “Wee Small Hours” (3.09), Salvatore “Sal” Romano refuses a sexual advance from Lee Garner, Jr., one of the top executives of Lucky Strike, a cigarette company that comprises the majority of Sterling Cooper’s business. Lee, obviously inebriated after a “long wet lunch” (3.09), aggressively propositions Sal inside a film editing room at Sterling Cooper while the two examine film footage for a new Lucky Strike commercial. Shocked and frightened, Sal refuses to engage in sexual activity at work with a male client, saying, “There’s been a misunderstanding” (3.09). In an effort to save face, Lee tells Sal, “I got it. You’re at work. That’s too bad” (3.09), but the knowledge that this situation is far from over is apparent when Sal violently throws film reels against a wall as soon as Lee exits the room. An offended and angry Lee telephones Harry Crane, who heads Sterling Cooper’s television department, and demands Sal’s immediate dismissal, saying, “I have a bit of a problem. It’s that Salvatore...He’s no good; I’d like him gone. I can’t work with him” (3.09). Because Harry believes Lee was acting drunk and irrationally, he fails to act on Lee’s demand. The following day, Lee storms out of the agency’s offices as soon as he sees Sal, indicating that his business will be taken elsewhere if Sal remains employed at Sterling Cooper.

In “The Other Woman” (5.11), Pete Campbell and Ken Cosgrove, two account executives at Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce (SCDP), treat Herb Rennet, a potential client and the dealer manager for the luxury car manufacturer Jaguar, to an expensive dinner in the hopes of securing his vote for SCDP to handle Jaguar’s advertising. During the dinner, Herb bluntly expresses his sexual attraction for the Director of Agency Operations, Joan Harris, saying, “I would sure like the opportunity to get to know her better” (5.11) and “I like that redhead. And I think she and I would both welcome the opportunity to spend the night together” (5.11). While the SCDP account executives politely tell Herb to ask Joan on a date if he wishes, Herb insinuates that if he is not assured a sexual encounter with Joan, he will revoke his support of SCDP’s bid to handle Jaguar’s advertising. After an awkward discussion, the partners of SCDP—excluding Don—vote to present Joan with an offer that she sleep with Herb for monetary compensation. Over the course of this episode, Joan grapples with the professional advantages and disadvantages of tolerating a sexual tryst

in exchange for a partnership yielding a 5% stake in the company, the deal that Joan brings to Pete after personal deliberation and a conversation with SCDP's financial officer. In an essay called "The Homosexual and the Single Girl," Alexander Doty examines depictions of homosexuality in *Mad Men*, arguing that its homosexual characters are introduced into the show's plot solely to further the growth of straight characters like Don or Don's female protégé, Peggy Olson. Writing well before *Mad Men*'s fifth season, Doty provides premonitory observations about how the series creates links between homosexual men and single career women. During "Wee Small Hours," Sal, attempting to validate his actions in the film editing room, asks Don, "I guess I was just supposed to do whatever he wanted? What if it was some girl?" ("Wee Small Hours," 3.09) Doty argues that Don's response, "That would depend upon what kind of girl it was and what I knew about her" ("Wee Small Hours," 3.09), implies "...when push comes to shove, homosexual men and single women can be lumped together under the sign of a despised sexuality that should, however, be at the disposal of patriarchal capitalism and the powerful men within it" (291). Doty argues that through Don and Sal's dialogue, the series conflates sexually active single women with homosexual men.

On the surface, Joan's situation in "The Other Woman" is consistent with Doty's analysis—both Sal and Joan appear to be assets of Sterling Cooper because of their individual sex appeals, and both face encouragement from certain coworkers to use their sexualities for the benefit of "patriarchal capitalism" (Doty 291). Although Sal and Joan's situations may appear to be aligned, a closer analysis reveals that their individual situations differ significantly. A comparison of Don's reactions to Sal and Joan's complex situations in "Wee Small Hours" (3.09) and "The Other Woman" (5.11) suggests that *Mad Men* makes clear distinctions between how Don—and perhaps the series itself—considers and values male homosexuality and active female heterosexuality in the context of both 1960s and contemporary social mores.

*Mad Men* employs "tropes that 1960s mainstream America associated with homosexuals" (Doty 281) to construct its homosexual characters, especially Sal, one of the early series' most prominent secondary characters. Sal's position as artistic director for

Sterling Cooper alludes to the “1960s cultural cliché of an interest in art and literature as the sign of a queer man” (282). Furthermore, multiple characters make comments about Sal’s close relationship with his mother, mirroring the mainstream assumption in the 1960s that “Mothers who overindulged their sons turned them into... ‘perverts.’ Sons bred in such homes, according to psychologists and psychoanalysts, would find it difficult to form ‘normal’ relationships with women” (May 96). Sal also marries a woman named Kitty, which viewers understand as Sal’s way of entering a “loveless marriage” (Coontz 33) to prevent suspicion of his homosexuality, a tactic prevalent among homosexual men and women during mid-twentieth century America.

Sal’s conspicuousness as an Italian-American man working among dozens of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant men and women at Sterling Cooper is established in *Mad Men’s* pilot episode, “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,” even before Sal has an onscreen moment. When an account man enters Don’s office and asks, “Have we ever hired any Jews?” Don replies, “We’ve got an Italian, Salvatore, my art director” (1.01). This dialogue establishes Sal, a dark-skinned Italian-American, as undoubtedly different not only in terms of his sexuality, but also in terms of his ethnicity. In *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America*, Jennifer Guglielmo explains that early to mid-twentieth century Italian immigrants to America “quickly learned that to be white meant having the ability to avoid many forms of violence and humiliation” (3). Despite Sal’s ability to acquire a professional reputation and gain access to agency social circles, his Italian-American identity does not go overlooked by his coworkers. His ethnicity is constantly alluded to throughout the series’ first three seasons, even by Sal himself. For example, when a coworker asks Sal if he has a girlfriend, Sal responds, “Come on, I’m Italian!” (“Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,” 1.01). Doty explains, “Sal uses his being Italian as an excuse for not having a girlfriend—which of course, might be understood as indicating a hypersexual libido, but with our knowledge of Sal, can also be understood as indicating his homosexuality through the sign of foreignness” (281). Doty’s reading is especially important given *Mad Men’s* frequent connection between homosexuality and foreignness, which reflects the mainstream practice of distancing homosexuality from American identity during the 1960s.

One of the clearest examples of this connection occurs in “The Jet Set” (2.11), which Rodney Taveria cites in “California and Irony in *Mad Men*” as an “episode in which knowledge of the closet freely circulates in the offices of Sterling Cooper” (285). In this episode, Kurt Smith, a German designer hired by Sterling Cooper to help the agency appeal to a younger audience, matter-of-factly reveals his homosexuality, “I make love with the men, not the women,” (“The Jet Set,” 2.11) when someone makes a comment about how he has a crush on Peggy. Employees of Sterling Cooper contain homosexuality by associating it with foreignness, saying, “He’s from Europe. It’s different there” (“The Jet Set,” 2.11) and “I knew queers existed, I just don’t want to work with them” (“The Jet Set,” 2.11). These reactions embody everything Sal fears as an Italian-American homosexual man and illustrate how *Mad Men* imagines the unjust, yet pervasive, attitudes toward racial and sexual difference during the 1960s.

Contemporary viewers can easily glean information about Sal’s homosexuality from as early as the show’s pilot episode. Sal’s overly flippant remark to Sterling Cooper’s head of research, “So we’re supposed to believe that people are living one way and secretly thinking the exact opposite? That’s ridiculous” (“Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,” 1.01) is one of the many obvious disclosures in the show’s narrative. However, Sal remains closeted to most characters in the series except for a few noteworthy instances. Though *Mad Men* constructs Sal as an amalgamation of certain 1960s stereotypes concerning homosexuality, the series surprisingly deviates from 1960s social mores in “Out of Town” (3.01), an episode in which Don unintentionally discovers Sal in a state of undress with a male bellhop at a hotel. Don’s reaction toward Sal’s homosexuality in this episode seems to challenge historical information on homosexuality in the workplace. In *The Lavender Scare*, David K. Johnson explores the national fear and oppression of homosexuality during the early Cold War, comparing the persecution and dismissal of alleged homosexual government workers during the “Lavender Scare” to the targeting of alleged communists in the federal government by Senator Joseph McCarthy during the Red Scare. Although the national memory of the Lavender Scare seems forgetful of these anti-gay purges compared to the “national limelight” (Johnson 5) granted to the Red Scare, Johnson

argues, “the lessening of publicity after 1950 is not a testament to the lack of antigay efforts but to their routinization and institutionalization in the bureaucracy of the national security state” (5). Beginning in 1950, the Lavender Scare represented an era of mainstream opinion in which government officials, journalists, and Americans citizens considered homosexuality a larger threat to national security than communism.

Don’s reaction to Sal’s homosexuality in “Out of Town” suggests that he possesses a relatively progressive attitude toward homosexuality—as long as it is kept a secret. Don tacitly relates his outlook to Sal in the form of an advertising tagline: “Limit your exposure” (“Out of Town,” 3.01). Cultural studies scholar Lee Wallace reads Don’s reactions in his essay “Fag Men: Mad Men, Homosexuality, and Televisual Style,” observing “...when homosexual recognition falls into Don’s domain it becomes a defining measure of the suavely straight man who couldn’t care less what a queer employee does in bed, just that he keep appearances intact” (215). Wallace also reads Don’s tagline as a historical perspective on the closet, arguing that “Limit your exposure” serves as advice and warning: “[the tagline] does double duty as tacit advice from one sexually experienced man to another as well as ensuring that the matter will never be directly addressed” (215). Although “Out of Town” provides contemporary audiences with hope that Don’s progressive attitude toward homosexuality will continue, his unhistorical attitude shifts dramatically as soon as Sterling Cooper’s financial wellbeing hinges on Sal instrumentalizing his sexuality for the good of the agency.

In “Wee Small Hours,” Sal attempts to explain his averse reaction to Lee’s advances in the film editing room; “He was drunk. And he cornered me in the editing room...And I backed him off, I told him I was married” (3.09). Unlike the understanding, and even forgiving, Don from “Out of Town,” Don’s facial expressions and tone in this situation are contemptuous, angry, and downright cruel. Don mockingly asks Sal, “But nothing happened? Because nothing could have happened because you’re married?” and later shakes his head in disgust saying with a sneer, “You people” (“Wee Small Hours,” 3.09). In this scene, it becomes clear that Don has no sympathy for Sal’s personal wellbeing when a \$25 million account is involved and insinuates that, since Sal engages in homosexual



behaviors recreationally, he should be more than willing to use his sexuality as an asset for Sterling Cooper. Don's management of this situation suggests that he can overlook Sal's recreational homosexuality behind closed doors, but as soon as Sterling Cooper and a high-profile client are involved, Sal's lack of action—his inability to instrumentalize homosexuality for the benefit of the agency—is inexcusable and naïve.

It's notable that Don values the success of Sterling Cooper over Sal's personal sexual choices, because Don himself participates in a similar situation with one of the agency's female clients earlier in the series. However, unlike Sal, Don responds to the sexual desires of this client favorably and is able to leverage his sexuality for the good of Sterling Cooper. In "The New Girl," (2.05) Jimmy Barrett, a provocative comedian and spokesperson for Sterling Cooper's client Utz Potato Chips, insults the wife of Utz's owner, causing Utz to question whether they want Jimmy (and ultimately Sterling Cooper) to represent their company to the public. Don contacts Jimmy's wife and manager Bobbie Barrett, and then asserts his control over the situation through a sexual tryst. Bobbie attempts to use this affair to her advantage, saying "I had sex with you so now you do what I say," but Don responds, "No, *I* had sex with *you*, so you do what I say" ("The New Girl," 2.05). In the end, Don uses his sexuality to thrill Bobbie into doing Sterling Cooper's bidding. Through Don's sexual affair with Bobbie, *Mad Men* informs viewers that Don is not morally opposed to using his own sexuality to secure the well being of Sterling Cooper.

Don's belief that sexuality plays an important role in business transactions takes a dramatic turn as soon as the sexual player in the situation is a woman. While Don fires Sal without any moral qualms in "Wee Small Hours," his immediate reaction to the mere idea of approaching Joan with compensation for sleeping with Herb has a moral and sentimental undertone: "She has a husband in Vietnam and a baby at home!" ("The Other Woman," 5.11). Don disregards the ethical implications of Sal's situation with Lee Garner Jr., diminishing Sal's feelings and well-being in favor of ensuring the financial health of Sterling Cooper. However, he consistently frames Joan's situation morally, even though the promised outcome of Joan sleeping with Herb, the acquisition of a luxury car manufacturer

account, is as high, if not higher, a financial reward as the Lucky Strike account in Sal's situation.

If the series demonstrates that sexuality has an important role in business transactions, why does Don draw the line when it comes to Joan? Don's reactions to Joan's complex situation in "The Other Woman" suggest that he does not condone the active use of female sexuality as a tool or advantage within the male-dominated corporate world. However, *Mad Men* constructs Joan as a figure who utilizes her sexuality to the utmost in her professional career. Much like how *Mad Men* conceives Sal using 1960s tropes about homosexuality, the series constructs Joan as a "woman of her particular era, not yet engaged in the second-wave feminist movement but embracing the precursors of the sexual revolution" (Cox 1). Series creator Matthew Weiner has repeatedly attributed Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl*, a cheeky advice book for women published in 1962, as the major inspiration behind Joan's character. In Gurley Brown's words, *Sex and the Single Girl* "is not a study on how to get married but how to stay single—in superlative style" (11) and boldly proclaims "Sex is a powerful weapon for a single woman in getting what she wants from life" (70). During the first few seasons, Joan reaches the highest level possible as a secretary and appears to be proud of the integral organizational role she plays at Sterling Cooper. Her ongoing advice to newcomer Peggy Olson implies that Joan earned her venerated role through hard work, but also through careful manipulation of her image, persona, and sexuality. For example, after Peggy expresses dismay at being left out from after work outings, Joan bluntly tells her, "Stop dressing like a little girl" ("Maidenform," 2.6) and sure enough, after Peggy takes Joan's advice, her success and conventional attractiveness increase directly.

While *Mad Men*'s first few seasons portray Joan as content with her role at the agency, the series complicates the validity of how Joan uses her sexuality for professional leverage. While her curvaceous figure and manicured beauty captivate *Mad Men*'s characters and viewers alike, her visible sex appeal also prompts "constant sexual innuendo and outright harassment by male-coworkers," (Coontz, "Why 'Mad Men' Is TV's Most Feminist Show") like when a male co-worker tells Joan, "I'm not some young girl off the

bus. I don't need some madame from a Shanghai whorehouse to show me the ropes" ("The Summer Man," 4.08) after she confronts him about his negative attitude. The later seasons often display Joan's inability to advance professionally, despite her longstanding professional commitment to Sterling Cooper. For example, although Joan is promoted to Director of Agency Operations in season four, she notes that the job is little more than a title: "I was just made Director of Agency Operations. A title, no money of course. And if they poured champagne, it must have been while I was pushing the mailcart" ("Tomorrowland," 4.13). *Mad Men* constantly frames Joan's sexuality as a double-edged sword—on the one hand, she is comfortable using her sexuality to get what she wants, but on the other hand, what she wants is always out of reach because she is so sexually provocative.

Before analyzing Don's reaction to Joan's situation in "The Other Woman," it is important to recognize that Don's distaste for active female sexuality exists beyond Joan's circumstance in this episode. Given Don's notorious promiscuity throughout the series, *Mad Men* provides him with a compelling aversion to female sexuality under certain circumstances. *Mad Men* frequently demonstrates the widespread sexual double-standard imposed on women during the 1950s and 1960s through Don's interactions with his romantic partners and female coworkers: "What we now think of as 1950s sexual morality depended not so much on stricter sexual control as on intensification of the sexual double standard" (Coontz 39). For example, Don scorns and regulates public displays of the female body, especially when the female in question is his romantic partner. In "Maidenform," Don sternly chastises his first wife Betty for wearing a bikini around the house, saying, "Where are you going in that?...Do you want to be ogled? It's desperate" (2.06). Don sees her scantily clad body as an open invitation for anyone "a 15-year-old life guard...a bunch of tennis pros...all those loafing millionaires taking the summer off" ("Maidenform," 2.06) to observe and take pleasure in her body, a thought detestable to him as Betty's husband: "The double-standard male usually wants a girl to whom he is committed to be 'good'...women were the ones who suffered the stigma of violating the taboo" (May 122-123). Although Don is by no means committed to Betty throughout the

series, he nonetheless expects Betty to abide by unwritten rules of sexual inequality. Don's attitude toward Betty's sexuality reveals that as her husband, he controls Betty's sexuality—in his eyes, Betty has no right to be sexy outside the bedroom unless it's on his own terms.

Don also shows contempt for women who attempt to initiate a sexual relationship with him, demonstrating the general belief in the early 1960s that "...it was...considered 'normal' for men to be sexually aggressive" (Coontz 40). He displays disapproval when female characters approach him first for a sexual relationship, implying that men should initiate sex with women and not the other way around. For example, in the show's pilot, Peggy nervously attempts to flirt with Don (which she believes is part of her job description after a rigorous first day experiencing what contemporary viewers would call nonstop sexual harassment), but Don disapproves of her advance, saying, "Peggy, I'm your boss, not your boyfriend" ("Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," 1.01). This statement seems laughable when considering the entire series, since Don has had multiple relationships with future secretaries and even goes on to marry one of them. However, when Don engages in extramarital affairs, he more often than not initiates the relationships. Don's attitude reflects the widely expressed opinion during the 1950s and 1960s that the best way for a young woman "to snare a male" was through "allure": "...this catching and snaring was to be accomplished passively, with bait rather than a net... 'pretend to let him catch you' was the rule" (May 119). As long as Don has control over how his affairs begin and play out, he remains content and encourages his partners to tantalize him.

Don's relationship with his second wife (and former secretary) Megan, a daytime soap opera actress, displays his distaste for female sexuality when it is used for professional advancement. In "To Have and To Hold," (6.04) Don belittles Megan after he sees her perform a love scene on set, even though Megan is simply acting and Don carries on an actual affair with a neighbor in the same episode. Don cruelly equates Megan's acting with prostitution, yelling, "You kiss people for money, you know who does that?" (6.04). Don views the active use of female sexuality in cases unrelated to his personal pleasure as a husband or lover as distasteful, vain, and verging on prostitution. These examples are useful when understanding Don's reaction to the offer initially presented to Joan, "a 10%

finders fee on the first year's commission...\$50,000, a flattering amount" (5.11), because they imply that his disapproval may have less to do with his respect for Joan, and more to do with his attitude toward active female sexuality.

It makes sense that Don would have a complicated relationship with female sexuality given *Mad Men's* hefty narrative investment in the psychological effects of past trauma on the present. Joyce Slochower theorizes that Don's traumatic past contributes to his participation in "stifling mores of his time...because Don's compulsive philandering mirrors the cultural stereotype, we don't immediately recognize the intrapsychic conflicts on which it's based...But we...learn that there's more here than meets the eye because we're given access to Don's interior life" (385). Flashbacks to Don's childhood reveal that his mother was a prostitute who died during childbirth and his stepmother and father frequently called him "a whore's child" ("The Hobo Code," 1.08) to instill him with a sense of shame and inadequacy. Furthermore, "The Crash" reveals that a prostitute molested Don during his early adolescence, and that this woman exposes his loss of virginity to his stepmother, who then beats him and call him "filthy" and "disgusting" (6.08).

Though *Mad Men's* construction of Don's past adds an interesting psychological explanation for his disapproval of active female sexuality, in a larger sense, *Mad Men* also imagines Don participating in a set of "widely expressed values" (May 115) toward female sexuality during the 1950s and 1960s when he attempts to dissuade Joan from sleeping with Herb in "The Other Woman." While Don rationalizes with Sal, "Lucky Strike could shut off our lights," ("Wee Small Hours," 3.09) he compassionately tells Joan, "I wanted to tell you that it's not worth it. And if we don't get Jaguar, so what? Who wants to be in business with people like that?" ("The Other Woman," 5.11). *Mad Men* endows Don with sentimentality and a moral high ground in Joan's case because of his established contempt for active female sexuality, but in a larger sense his reactions to Joan's situation reflects the dominant ideology during the 1950s and 1960s that female sexuality is good in certain scenarios, like in marriage or when it is passively used to attract suitors, but immoral in other situations, like when it is used in service of a woman's career or ambition. As Elaine Tyler May notes, predominant opinion during the 1960s scorned the manipulation of

female sexuality: “those who used their sexuality for power or greed would destroy men, families, and even society” (63). While Don is certainly not against hiring or working with women—an obvious example is his protégé Peggy—his opinion that “it’s not worth it” (“The Other Woman,” 5.11) for SCDP to use sex as leverage in Joan’s case suggests that active female sexuality should not have an important role in business strategy from a moral standpoint.

May cites Marilyn Monroe’s films as perfect emblems of the dichotomy between “good” and “bad” types of female sexuality (63) and interestingly, *Mad Men* compares Joan to Monroe multiple times throughout the series. For example, when one account man proves his new advertising theory, “Jackie Kennedy. Marilyn Monroe. Every single woman is one of them” by pointing out various secretaries as being either “a Jackie” or “a Marilyn,” he admits, “Well, Marilyn’s really a Joan, not the other way around” (“Maidenform,” 2.06). Additionally, in “Six Month Leave,” Joan expresses her sense of loss when Marilyn Monroe dies: “She was so young...A lot of people felt like they knew her...This world destroyed her” (2.09). The Joan-Marilyn connection displays the extremely thin line between “good” and “bad” sexuality that Joan attempts to walk in her professional career.

Ultimately, Joan’s decision to sleep with Herb was unaffected by Don’s moral pleas because she had already gone through with it by the time Don spoke with her. By structuring the episode through a series of flashbacks, *Mad Men* encourages viewers to ask whether or not Joan would have completed her end of the bargain had she spoken with Don before she slept with Herb. Todd VanDerWerff skillfully reads this scene in an episode recap for The AV Club, “When Don goes to tell Joan not do it, she calls him one of the ‘good ones’...because she knows how naïve he is and how little his goodness—if it exists—counts for anything...He does the right thing because it looks good” (“Mad Men: ‘The Other Woman’”). Understanding how Joan’s character derives from Sex and the Single Girl and taking into account her inability to advance past secretarial status throughout the series, viewers must know that Joan has little room to seriously consider Don’s morality-soaked double-standards. Joan sees the partnership offer as a once in a lifetime opportunity to crash through Sterling Cooper’s glass ceiling.

Television critics and Internet bloggers often disagree on how *Mad Men* prompts contemporary viewers to respond to its depiction of history, especially since episodes often include blatant sexism, racism, and homophobia in an effort to capture 1960s social mores. One faction of critics praises the show for its uncompromising depiction of history, including noted historian and family studies scholar Stephanie Coontz. Coontz took a survey of 200 women who personally experienced the era *Mad Men* recreates and found surprising results: “...Most of these women refused to watch *Mad Men*. Not because they found its portrayal of male-female relations unrealistic...It was precisely because *Mad Men* portrayed the sexism of that era so unflinchingly...that they could not bear to watch” (Coontz, "Why 'Mad Men' Is TV's Most Feminist Show"). On the other hand, some critics decry *Mad Men* as belonging to a “genre of Now We Know Better,” in which, “criticism of the past is used to congratulate the present” (Greif 2008). Members of this latter camp see *Mad Men* as giving contemporary viewers a misplaced nostalgia for an era of unchecked sexism: “The message that many women...seem to have taken...is not relief or gratitude at what’s changed...but something quite different: Those fashions are cool! God Don’s hot! Are you a Joan or a Peggy?” (Engoron 2010) and a substantial amount of distance from 1960s oppression to feel comfortably detached and superior to unsavory aspects of the show: “We watch and know better about male chauvinism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, workplace harassment, housewives’ depression, nutrition and smoking” (Greif 2008). Such positions assume a liberal narrative of progress occurring in both the series and in history itself—that because we, as viewers, are further along the chronological spectrum of history, we somehow know better about the issues of gender, race, and sexuality that *Mad Men* depicts, and because we know better such issues cease to exist with the passing of time.

Although time moves linearly in the series—the pilot episode begins in March 1960 and the final season is expected to take place in 1969—its linear narrative and stylized setting distract many viewers and critics from the idea that *Mad Men* may have as much to say about contemporary viewers as it does about the 1960s. As Katixa Agirre notes in a consideration of post-feminist awareness in *Mad Men*, “Time dislocation operates as a distancing device at times, but at others it is a witty reminder of our own vices” (167).

While the political and social rights of LGBT individuals and women have certainly advanced since the 1960s, discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender continues to affect our contemporary lives.

One of the most widespread manifestations of contemporary sexual orientation and gender discrimination occurs in the workplace. As of March 2014, “it is legal to fire or refuse to hire someone based on his or her sexual orientation in 29 states. Those who are transgender can be fired or denied employment solely based on gender identity in 33 states” (“Employment Non-Discrimination Act”). The diegetic insertion of two Martin Luther King Jr. speeches in “Wee Small Hours” serves as a clever reminder that while Sal’s dismissal was a product of the 1960s, workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation persists despite major advances in civil rights issues since the 1960s. Similarly, Joan’s inability to gain equal footing with her male coworkers reflects 1960s social mores, but it may also address contemporary inequalities between men and women in the workplace. Disparities between women’s and men’s earnings for equal work, considerable overrepresentation of men in management positions, and limited professional choices for women are all factors affecting women in the workplace today. Furthermore, *Mad Men* creator Matthew Weiner has gone on record connecting Joan’s situation in “The Other Woman” to contemporary challenges that women face in work environments: “This...was something that came up so many times...so while I love that people think that Joan wouldn’t do that, all I can tell you is it really happened. A lot...The fact that it was Joan is because there is a Joan in a lot of the agencies, and there still is” (Rose 2). The situations that Sal and Joan face in their work and personal lives have one foot in the past and another in the present. Although *Mad Men* may initially look like a time machine, careful consideration of its characters and narratives reveal that it may actually function more like a mirror.



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