

READING CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION

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Men Behaving as Boys: The Culture of *Mad Men*

William Siska

'Love and work are the cornerstones of our humanness.'

– Sigmund Freud (*Civilization and Its Discontents* 48)

The men in the fictional advertising firm of Sterling Cooper feel free to comment, favourably or unfavourably, in earshot or out, on the endowments of the women in the workforce. The women toil in a version of English philosopher Jeremy Bentham's panoptikon, a central enclosed space in which they can be viewed at all times. Men work singly or in pairs in private offices that surround the women's area. Those privileged with corner offices or other large, window-lined domiciles access well-stocked liquor cabinets at any time of day to suit any emotion. They light and puff cigarettes ritualistically and compulsively. Somebody else empties the ashtrays.

If this reads like the description of a latter-day male heaven, think again. The male employees of Sterling Cooper, save its eccentric co-founder Bert Cooper, are unhappy, often desperately so. At any rung of the career ladder, though more frequently towards the bottom, the spectre of dispensability and fear of backstabbing competition permeate the atmosphere. What has gone wrong with these self-styled *Mad Men*? They were lucky enough to have gotten in on the ground floor of America's longest-running binge of priming the nation with consumer goods. Why are they experiencing such misery? For all the apparent success, riches and gratified egos of the men of advertising circa 1960, and the vicarious pleasure or amused outrage we take in watching them flout rules of behaviour that bind

us in our own time, by analyzing the reality beneath the image, we find in *Mad Men* a stern, even subversive critique of American capitalism and consumer culture.

The post-structuralist Michel Foucault made his mark by provocatively overturning items of conventional wisdom accepted by most people in the late twentieth century. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, he rejected the notion that Victorian abjuration of displays of sexuality bespoke a profound repression, and argued that our contemporary hyper-sexualized advertising and popular culture was itself evidence of neurosis and inhibition regarding sexuality. In this assertion, Foucault places himself in the tradition of Sigmund Freud, who theorized in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that in the neurotic individual's conscious motivations often mask unconscious drives much the opposite. Thus, the overtly hedonist Roger Sterling (who came to power the old-fashioned way: his father was co-founder of the firm) rationalizes his excessive smoking, drinking and womanizing as a pursuit of life's pleasures – just payment for having survived the terrors of World War II combat. In contrast, this behaviour can be read as an unconscious desire for his own demise.

These theories are impossible to prove, but provide a useful template for understanding the male culture of *Mad Men*. In Matt Weiner's series, what appears to be the celebratory cataloguing of the behavioural indulgences of adult alpha males during the period of economic expansion in 1960s America turn out to be symptoms of regression, the 'acting out' of a longing to return to a pre-industrial way of living. The formula of the 'workplace as family' ('tribe' might be a more accurate term sociologically) has been a network television staple for 40 years, and some of the medium's most successful and highly regarded shows fit this paradigm. Beginning in the 1970s with *M*A*S*H* (CBS, 1972–83) and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970–77), TV showed us workplaces that performed important social functions in high stress environments that brought the participants into close friendship with each other. More recent manifestations of this formula are *Boston Legal* (ABC, 2004–08) and *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005–present). In the most honoured of these programmes, *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999–2006), the running of the United States government itself is seen as a process accomplished by a cohort of workers coalescing as a family, mutually supportive

and uniting against outsiders, of whom even the President's wife is treated as a problem to be solved rather than as a member of the group.

The formulation of the early German Swiss sociologist, Ferdinand Tönnies, regarding the shift from a pre-industrial and highly rural society to an industrial, urbanized citizenry helps explain the popularity of these programmes and the psychological function they fulfil. Tönnies theorized that in pre-industrial Europe persons were united by common bonds – by shared beliefs, interests and blood – into a *gemeinschaft*, a community based on friendship. In the *gemeinschaft*, an individual is valued for who he or she is, existence alone confers value. With the move to cities, where persons are given tasks of building and operating complex commercial and social institutions, individuals experience a separation from their communities and from the security their social identity once gave them. Now they are in a *gesellschaft*, a formal social organization based on the contract, where people's sense of worth, indeed their very survival, is based not on who they are but on how they fulfil their end of a contract, on what they can deliver to another, often impersonal company or institution (De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach 143 ff).

'Workplace as family' programmes work out a social fantasy of turning the *gesellschaft* into a *gemeinschaft*, providing reassurance that though the individual must labour to fulfil his or her contract, the real reason for being in the workplace is because it provides a stronger sense of community than exists in the world outside it. Family life outside the workplace rarely intrudes into the worlds of *M*A*S*H* and *Mary Tyler Moore*. One can logically speculate that this formula has resonated so strongly with American audiences of the last 40 years because the typical working American spends half his or her waking hours surrounded not by family, but as part of an arbitrary group of persons thrown together to perform tasks, and it's comforting to think that in a social environment that provides for our livelihood based on what we can deliver, we can still be appreciated for who we are.

Network television has always seen itself constrained to present life in the workplace as comedy rather than drama or tragedy, and it is no surprise that all the popular series mentioned earlier are comedies. Police procedurals such as *Law & Order* (NBC, 1990–present)

and *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (CBS, 2000-present) provide representation of the opposite experience of the world outside the home, playing on audience fears of life 'outside' in our impersonal and highly competitive commercial society. *Mad Men* more realistically turns this formula on its head, moving the paradigm from comedy to drama. The fantasy is still there, that the workplace (*Gesellschaft*) can embrace us as community (*Gemeinschaft*), but the energy for this comes not from an overlay of a bourgeois wish-fulfilment ideology onto workplace shows, but as an expression of the emotional needs of the characters in the drama itself.

At the centre of *Mad Men* and commanding its screen time is its lead, Don Draper (Jon Hamm), the Sterling Cooper advertising firm's 'golden boy'. Novelist Barbara Kingsolver says, in reference to her novel *Lacuna*, 'the most interesting thing about a character is what we don't know about him' (*Bob Edwards Weekend*). If this is true, the opacity of Don Draper on *Mad Men* solidifies his position as the show's lead, for disclosure of crucial parts of his backstory are intentionally withheld from the audience to be revealed at moments that heighten the drama of his situation at the time of revelation. Gradually, we learn about his hardscrabble upbringing, his birth to a prostitute and his biological father's early death. We learn in a jolting episode the mystery of how he came to change his name in an attempt to wipe out his wrong-side-of-the-tracks roots. But even after three years we don't know how he came to court and win Betty, his wife, nor how he has risen to the prestigious and powerful position of creative director at a mid-sized advertising firm.

Jon Hamm and the character he portrays has been promoted as a 'new-old' romantic leading man, in the mould of iconic strongmen of few words like Clark Gable, Gary Cooper and John Wayne. It is Cooper that Jon Hamm most resembles physically. The Cooper persona is shy, even deferential around women, and in moments of tense conflict never loses his composure. Cooper said little, and let women talk. This, according to biographer Jeffrey Meyers, allowed women to share their inner feelings with him, and that made them love him all the more.

Don Draper seems to be cast in this mould. Joy, the youthful hedonist who seduces him on his California trip tells him, 'You're beautiful and you don't talk too much' ('The Jet Set', 2:24). He can therefore become hers and other peoples' fantasy. Don's reticence

can also come across as cold and disinterested. Don often doesn't have much to say to other people because he just doesn't care all that much about them. He doesn't have room in his psyche for anyone else. Indeed, Don veers so close to being an unsympathetic protagonist, with his resistance to his wife Betty's emotional needs and his serial betrayals of his marriage, his lack of affect and his general unavailability towards his children until the last few episodes of season three, that he seems sometimes not worth the effort of the characters close to him or similarly of viewers to stay with him. Don challenges everyone not to care.

Yet the intensely loyal audience of *Mad Men* stays with him week after week because Don Draper is a character on an inner quest for self-understanding and self-acceptance. He is a common character in the best American literature of the last half of the twentieth century – Bellow's Herzog, Updike's Rabbit, and Roth's Zuckerman. Don is opaque to us because he is opaque to himself. His 'man of mystery' exterior is an expression of his inner life; he's a figure who knows he wants to escape his past, is frustrated by his present, but by the end of season three is only beginning to formulate an idea of where he wants his future to lead.

The first clue to understanding Don's troubled psyche occurs in 'The Marriage of Figaro' (1:3) where the claustrophobia induced by the domestic demands of his daughter's birthday party leads to a panic attack. Don drives off to fetch the birthday cake and fails to return until after the guests have left, taking his car anywhere just to keep moving. The audience's knowledge that something is wrong with Don is challenged by the suave, cool certitude with which he handles his job and his co-workers. Initially, Don appears a near descendent of the 1950s 'Man in a Gray Flannel Suit' overcome by anxiety, but as events unfold we come to see him as an anxious and insecure adolescent who hasn't fully accepted the entitlement of his position.

Flashbacks during season one reveal two critical facts of Don's existence that fly in the face of his identity as a crack Madison Avenue executive with the glamorous wife, comfortable suburban home, and substantial bank account. During a flashback in 'The Hobo Code' (1:8), however, young Don is shown as dirt poor, raised by a diffident stepmother whose remarriage to a brutal man results in Don being treated as a pariah in his home. In this episode, an

out-of-work Depression era wanderer shows up at his parents' farm begging for work. Don instinctively identifies with the man and wants to help him. This incident echoes Don's psychic state as a lost man despite his surface persona as a leading advertising executive, and prefigures the wandering 'hobo' he will become in season two when he flees his family and work in California.

So repelled is the young Don by the life he might return to after the Korean War that when his commanding officer dies in a freak battlefield accident, Don exchanges his identity with the dead man ('Nixon vs. Kennedy', 1:12). With this act, Don Draper becomes a quintessentially American figure, shedding his past to reinvent himself, unaware that the tenuousness of the re-created self will lead him to doubt his own authenticity. Don's flight from his past and desire to become a different person leads him into some despicable behaviour. When Don's admiring younger half-brother Adam shows up in Manhattan, having come in search of some recognition from his successful sibling, Don rejects him harshly ('5G', 1:5) and his brother eventually commits suicide ('Indian Summer', 1:11).

Don's several affairs are affronts to his wife Betty and threaten his family life, but he pursues them relentlessly, out of a need for both escape and self-definition. The women he chooses are remarkably similar to each other and contrast strongly with his wife. With the exception of the sybaritic Joy, all are women with professional identities that give them an independence that his stay-at-home wife Betty lacks. Midge, the commercial artist, and Rachel, the department store heiress, are conspicuously dark-haired compared to Betty's icy-blond coiffure. The affairs end when Don flirts with deeper commitment by suggesting rash flights from his present-day reality by asking Midge to move with him to Paris ('The Hobo Code', 1:8) or Rachel to run away with him to San Francisco ('Nixon vs. Kennedy', 1:12). The women are not lost souls, however, as they confidently move on with their lives instead. In their own ways, Midge and Rachel are mirror images of Don, and in his affairs with them, he is looking at, and looking for, himself.

In screenplay parlance, the hero's mirror is the character who can talk back to the hero and get him to level with himself, which is what occurs when Don flees the perfect image of a cardboard marriage for the arms of other women. The hip Midge brings Don into a circle of Greenwich Village bohemians in season one, but their aimlessness,

arrogance and judgmentalism repels him. His season two sojourn in California leads him first into a brief liaison with Joy and her family of tanned hedonists, proving only to Don that he can't live a life of useless indolence ('The Jet Set', 2:11). In that same journey he reconnects with Anna, the wife of the real Don Draper, and relives his early post-Korean life as her surrogate husband. In this episode, Don learns that he cannot live a buried life as a blue-collar married man, working on hot rods in the alley with the guys ('The Mountain King', 2:12).

Still, Don is unsure of what in his life is worthwhile. Midge questions his choice of work in season one, as does the idealistic school teacher Suzanne in season three. Don admires Suzanne for her dedication to both her demanding vocation and her lost and ungrateful brother. 'Are you dumb or pure?' he asks her in admiration, though this only points up his own lack of purpose ('Wee Small Hours', 3:35). Don is feted by Sterling Cooper as the embodiment of the American Dream, moving from an obscure background to prominence in the advertising profession ('The Color Blue', 3:36). Ultimately, it is an empty and sad occasion for Don; he is a 'golden boy' who hates himself in spite of his own good luck.

Don is a foundling, a Moses or Huck Finn character; Bert Cooper reminds Don that he has come from nothing and could be returned there if he doesn't sign the contract the firm has placed in front of him ('Wee Small Hours', 3:35). Don has behaved with an air of exceptionality. He flouts his independence with frequent unexplained absences from the office; he is an individualist in the age of the organization man. Bert and 'Connie' Hilton, the legendary high-profile client he lands and loses, recognize the unique perspective Don's individualism gives him that the more conformist executives lack. At the same time, they paradoxically feel obliged to rein him in: Bert with the contract; Connie with his rigid and unrealistic demands.

If Don is a character who exhibits significant neurotic symptoms, his cohorts at the top, Bert Cooper and Roger Sterling, are no less 'Freudian' in their behaviour. Bert's eccentricities are modelled after Howard Hughes, who was compulsive about cleanliness and sequestered himself in luxurious quarters well-separated from his employees. Don and Roger do not even grin conspiratorially as they remove their shoes before entering the president's office, as Bert's power precludes them from finding him humourous.

The male patriarchy that rules in *Mad Men* insists that women want to present themselves for men's delectation in ways that men choose. They assert that what they want to see is either Marilyn Monroe or Jacqueline Kennedy. They also believe that all women want to be either one or the other ('Maidenform', 2:9). Office manager Joan Holloway is an almost cartoonishly top-heavy version of Marilyn, and gets her share of looks; Draper's new secretary, Jane Siegel, is a Jackie who becomes an increasingly troublesome trophy wife for firm partner Roger. Beyond that, though, the men think of Marilyn and Jackie less as cultural figures than as convenient icons to facilitate the sale of brassieres. When news of Marilyn Monroe's sad death of a drug overdose at age 36 in 1962 spreads through the office, the males take little notice; only one of the secretaries and later Joan express strong emotions over her death ('Six Month Leave', 2:22).

In fact, the advertising executives in *Mad Men* seem remarkably detached from the events of the day. They take a fleeting interest in aiding – gratis – the campaign of Richard Nixon, but when the politician's operatives don't follow up, the lukewarm Republicans at Sterling Cooper return to their moneymaking pursuits. The first thing that strikes us about *Mad Men* is that they are not mad in being capable of outrageous creativity, but instead, they are mad as being angry at the way the higher-ups dismiss their efforts and frustrate their ambitions. The title 'Mad Men' is a moniker the advertising execs apparently gave themselves, playing on the location of their firms' offices on or around Manhattan's Madison Avenue, and to give the illusory impression that their jobs were filled with madcap excitement and the freedom to imagine.

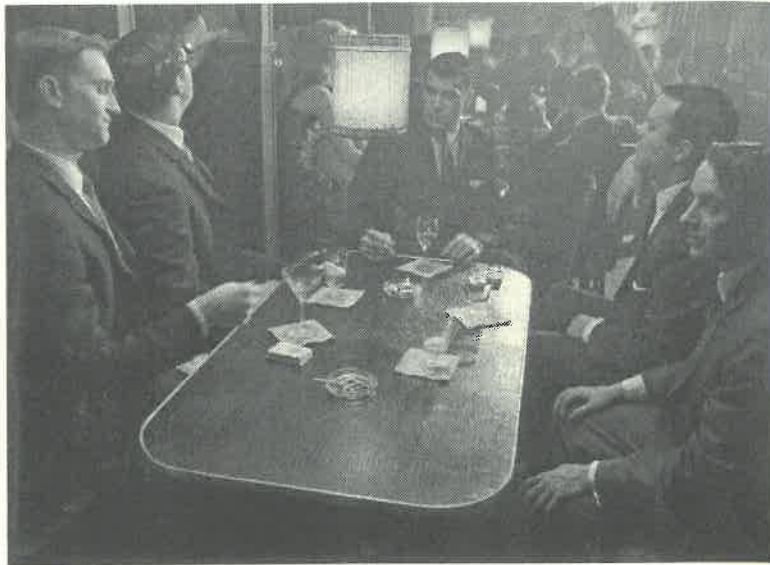
The relatively well-off young executives of Sterling Cooper are doing alienated labour but are not wholly aware of this situation. They blame their unhappiness on other things, usually the failings of their wives to excite them in the way they thought they deserved. Pete cannot maintain a healthy sexual relationship with his wife, and becomes a predator taking advantage of women of lower social status, as he does with Peggy during the first few episodes of season one as well as later on with Gudrun, a young European nanny in his apartment building ('Souvenir', 3:34). It's not until the end of season two, when the firm is sold to a British corporation that cares only about advancing its bottom line that the lower level executives at Sterling Cooper begin to realize their unease stems from their

own work environment. These characters are descendants of W. H. Auden's four ennuï-ridden urbanites in his 1948 long poem 'The Age of Anxiety', melancholic souls adrift in a dreary world of commerce.

One way Weiner and his creative team depict this theme is through the early 1960s set design and décor. The ad men at Sterling Cooper sweat to sell products for profit rather than for the improvement of society, and the dissonance between their energy and talents and the purpose to which they are put is best expressed by the office furniture. Stern sharp lines, hard surfaces and muted colours reflect the impossibility of soul craft in such a space. Only the crassest of human interactions take place in the offices of Sterling Cooper, such as Roger's after-hours exploitation of a young aspiring model on the office rug ('Long Weekend', 1:10), and the myriad muggings and betrayals of co-workers that pepper each episode, such as Pete's attempt to blackmail Don in order to secure a promotion for himself the easy way ('Nixon vs. Kennedy', 1:12).

When account executive Ken Cosgrove publishes a short story in *The Atlantic*, the combination of envy and admiration that this accomplishment arouses in his male peers suggests a traditional cultural hierarchy that values literary art over crass commercial enterprise ('5G', 1:5). Still, the junior executives at Sterling Cooper are not overly cynical about their profession. While Richard Yates' acclaimed novel of unhappiness in the 1950s corporate milieu *Revolutionary Road* is an influence on *Mad Men*, its embittered would-be writer Frank Wheeler stands in marked contrast to the young advertising men in *Mad Men*. Pete, Paul, Ken, Harry and Sal never talk down about the work they do. They instead follow the lead of legendary advertising guru David Ogilvy who exults in any kind of advertising that sells a product. In *Confessions of an Advertising Man* (1963), Ogilvy begins with the basic premise that a product should be something consumers want to buy, if only they had the facts. The integrity of the advertisement is therefore connected to the quality of the goods to be sold.

What sets Don Draper apart is a much more contemporaneous attitude towards selling than the one espoused by Ogilvy. Don presciently tells a client and assembled co-workers in *Mad Men*'s inaugural episode that 'advertising is based on one thing, happiness. And you know what happiness is? It's a reassurance that whatever you are doing is okay. You are okay' ('Smoke Gets in Your Eyes', 1:1).



Despite a sense of privilege, advertising men Ken, Harry, Sal, Paul and Pete are generally unhappy, often desperately so. Courtesy of AMC.

For Don advertising is a metaphor for moving beyond the traditional concern with a product's quality to the personal preoccupation with how the consumer feels when he or she consumes it. If Don can create a sense of satisfaction in a consumer buying one of the products he's selling, whether it is an item in Menken's department store or a night in one of Conrad Hilton's hotel rooms, there is also a chance that Don might one day find that same kind of happiness for himself.

Mad Men is a show told in hindsight. It carefully plays up the audience's image of the 1960s as a decade of tumultuous social upheaval rambling headlong towards cultural modernization. Part of the show's critique of the culture at Sterling Cooper lies in the nonchalance with which the advertising executives ignore the tidal wave building up behind them. Pete Campbell's wife retreats to the Jersey shore for the duration of the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, but with few other expressions of fear, the work of selling continues unabated. Only Peggy and the European 'youth' brought in reluctantly as a bellwether for the buying tastes of the new generation share the excitement of discovering Bob Dylan, and rock music in general seems not to exist. You wouldn't know that the last works of

the giants of twentieth-century American literature, Faulkner and Hemingway, were finding their way posthumously into print, and that Updike's *Rabbit*, Bellow's *Herzog*, and Philip Roth's stories of suburban discontent were imminent.

Mad Men, like other historical allegories, is about the time in which it is set and about the time in which it is produced. Up through Halloween 1963, the range of experiences of the *Mad Men* has been narrow and cloistered. The penultimate episode of season three, 'The Grown-Ups' (3:38) encompasses 22 November 1963, and the dazed weekend that followed. *Mad Men* dramatizes the Kennedy assassination as a sea change that rocked the American psyche and lifts the veil of safety and innocence behind which Americans discover they have been fecklessly living. Roger Sterling lamely tries to rally the decimated crowd at his daughter's 23 November wedding to some degree of joy with little success. Several scenes later Don Draper says to Peggy Olson, 'We know things will never be the same', which holds special meaning for current viewers because they can relate to the similarly life-changing events of 11 September 2001.

This sombre episode is then followed by 'Shut the Door. Have a Seat' (3:39), which is one of the liveliest in the whole series. 'Shut the Door. Have a Seat' is fast-paced and crowded with incidents that dramatically reboots the drama and revivifies Don Draper with a reenergized personality. Don's bravado returns as he transforms from an enervated and beaten man faced with divorce and the dismantling of his picture-perfect suburban family to a charismatic leader exhorting Bert Cooper to abscond with him from the resold Sterling Cooper to strike out on their own with a brand new advertising firm.

He becomes a humble supplicant to both Roger Sterling and Peggy Olson, convincing them to sign on to the new venture, despite their resentment at Don's past behaviour to them. In 'Shut the Door. Have a Seat', we see Don transformed from a boss to a leader. The importance of Don's transformation to shore up his vulnerable identity is revealed in a powerful flashback as young Don watches his father, stretched past breaking by low Depression era grain prices, pull out of a farmer's cooperative to go it alone. Fortified by drink which encourages his hot temper, he unwisely bends down behind a horse in his barn, which kicks him in the head killing him instantly. Don will not repeat the ill-advised act of independence that brought down his father in such a stubborn and short-sighted way.

'Shut the Door. Have a Seat' also possesses the verve of a 'caper' film like Robert Redford's *The Hot Rock* (1972) or *Sneakers* (1992) as the partners of Sterling Cooper arrange for their own dismissal, then bring into their conspiracy the man who fired them (Lane Pryce), while also collecting the other men and women they need to pull off the 'heist' and set up their own shop. The 'caper' recalls Howard Hawks' last films with John Wayne, *Hatari!* (1962), *El Dorado* (1967) and *Rio Lobo* (1970), which share the same narrative pattern, in which Garry Wills writes in his insightful *John Wayne's America*, 'an improbable band uses its combined skills to overcome its obvious flaws.' Wills continues, 'The "caper" need not be a crime . . . it can be any feat that a disparate little band pulls off against long odds' (275). 'The high-spirited cooperation' of the people in the band gives this kind of narrative its tone and removes any possibility of tragic results (276).

When the remaining employees show up at the emptied offices of Sterling Cooper on Monday morning, pipe-smoking Paul Kinsey is visibly dismayed that he is not one of the chosen members of the group. There is much pleasure to be taken in the formation of the new members of Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce, as one person after another is added, akin to the gathering of the gunmen in *The Magnificent Seven* (1960). Don insists, 'We need an art director', leaving the door open for the wrongly fired Sal Romano to eventually be taken back by the re-energized band.

A signature characteristic of *Mad Men* during its first three seasons has been its toughness, its hard edge both in its treatment of characters whose less appealing qualities have been allowed to shine along with their sympathetic and amusing sides. Leaving the ravaged confines of Sterling Cooper for the last time, Don remarks that he never wanted to work in a place like this one anyway. The new workspace is an upscale albeit homey suite at the Pierre. For example, nerdy Harry Crane gets comfortable and right to work by eagerly claiming the bed as his desk. The 'workplace as family' theme is given a certain added nuance by the ambience and layout of the location.

Mad Men will tell its Busby Berkeley, 'Let's put on a show' story of the birth of a new advertising firm, and we will get a dramatization of the skills that Don Draper possesses, which have always made him a respected creative advertiser and a leader who inspires

his subordinates. The sensibilities of Weiner and his team suggest that the workplace worlds of *M*A*S*H* and *Mary Tyler Moore* are ideals that might flourish for a time, but the new firm will inevitably develop its own fissures and intrigues that marked life at Sterling Cooper, because that is the eventual consequence of corporate capitalism.

The regressively 'boyish' behaviour of the men at Sterling Cooper has never been a desire to recapture authentic feelings of childhood. None of the men, so far as we know, had an idyllic upbringing, especially Don Draper and Pete Campbell who apparently grew up in familial atmospheres that were cold, harsh and unfulfilling. Instead, the mad men behaving as boys in this series demonstrate a desire to escape to a future free of the tensions and need for conformity required by corporate America. The founding of a new company by a group of enthusiasts results in a temporary *gemeinschaft*: the reason Roger and Don must coax Peggy and Pete to join them is to assure them that they are wanted for who they are, and not just for what they can do. But the cracks in the armour of good feeling in this *gemeinschaft* are fated to appear and grow because the demands of the *gesellschaft* require that persons be evaluated by how well they fulfil the contract. As Charlie Chaplin's character tells the court that judges him at the end of *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947): 'Business is a dirty business.' Tension caused by the desire for *gemeinschaft* relationships in a *gesellschaft* world will inevitably bedevil the 'boys' of *Mad Men* in the seasons to come.

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