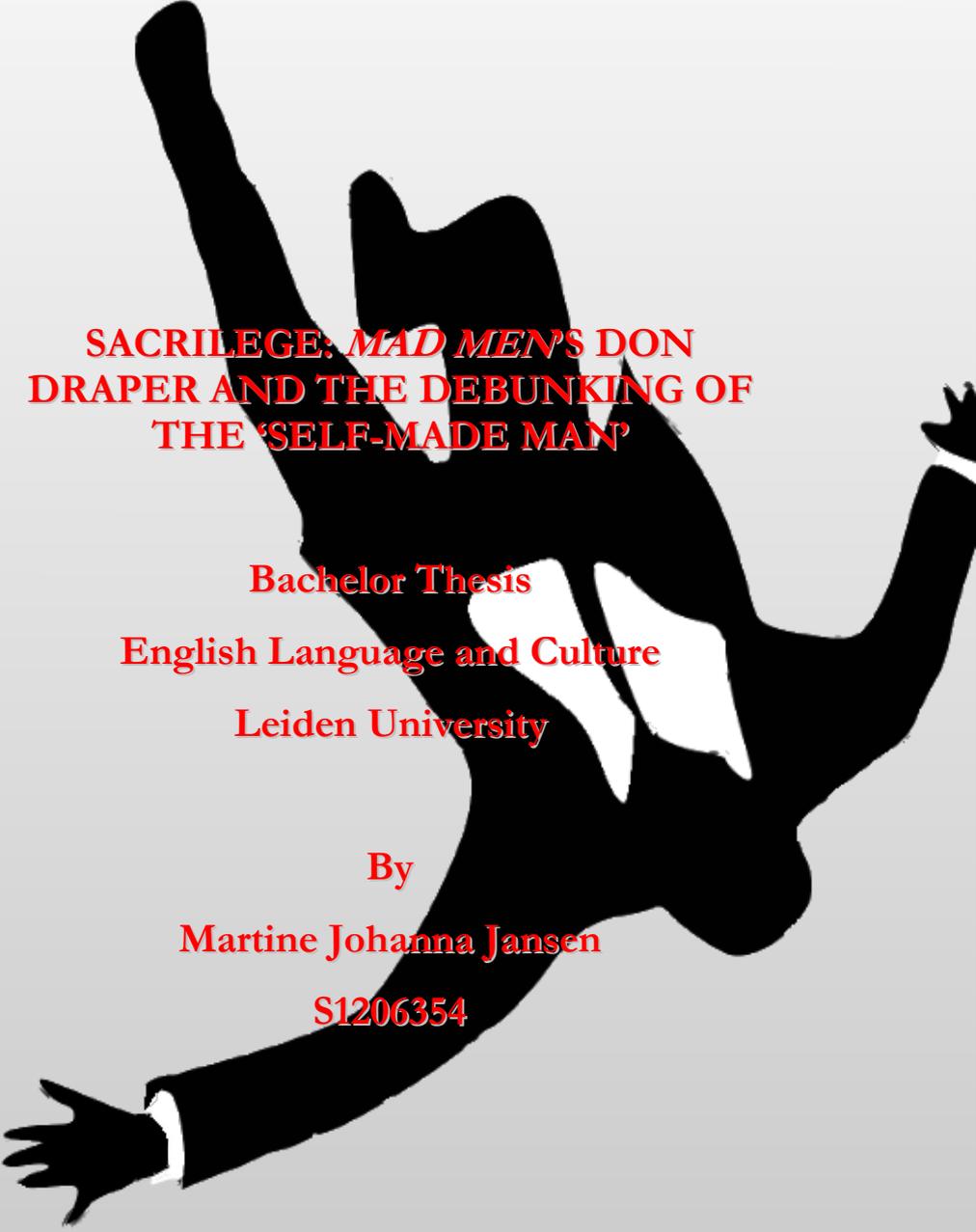


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**SACRILEGE: *MAD MEN*'S DON  
DRAPER AND THE DEBUNKING OF  
THE 'SELF-MADE MAN'**

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**By  
Martine Johanna Jansen  
S1206354**

SUPERVISOR: DR. M.S. NEWTON  
SECOND READER: DR. J.C. KARDUX

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Don Draper was voted the No. 1 Most Influential Man of 2009 in a poll conducted by AskMen.com. And Don's not even a real person. ('New Sentimentality' in Edgerton xxxii)

Welcome to the world of *Mad Men* (2007-2015), the series created by Matthew Weiner that offers an amusing look at 1960s style and the untiring world of Madison Avenue – a world dominated by white Anglo-Saxon men, where “ideas of racial and gender equality” are only just starting to make waves (Tudor 334). Since AMC launched its first season, the series has been lauded for its visual spectacle, its sometimes daring subject matter, and its shameless portrayal of political incorrectness. “Reviewers in the popular press have argued that a great deal of the appeal of this series lies in nostalgia and fashion” (Tudor 334), and James Meek points out that critics have complained about the lack of depth on issues such as racism, homophobia, and misogyny (30). But *Mad Men* is not just about the glamour, tenacity or sexism of successful ad men in mid-twentieth-century New York; it is not the ‘obvious’ that makes *Mad Men* tick. Richard Poirier says that “what we remember about a book or a writer – and this is notably true in American literature – is often the smallest, momentary revelations that nonetheless carry [...] an ‘enormous sense of inner authority’” (14). So it is with *Mad Men*. The appeal of the series is about what lies beneath the surface, and appears to us in ‘the smallest, momentary revelations’. This thesis will argue that one of those revelations is the presence of the American myth of the ‘self-made man’. More specifically, I shall demonstrate that the series employs the character of Don Draper to unravel the typical American ideology of self-making and the masculinity that this self-making seeks to bolster. The self-made man is of all cultures, but in no other culture is this archetype mythologized and revered in such a way, and at so many levels of society, as in the United States. From early political figures such as Benjamin Franklin and Andrew Jackson, to

modern-day business tycoons like Steve Jobs and Donald Trump, America loves a ‘self-made man’.

## 1.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

As Megan Abbott justly remarks in Matt Seitz’s *Mad Men Carousel* (2015), “it has become commonplace to draw parallels between today’s more ambitious television shows and the novel”; some of these series, “rich with social commentary, complicated story arcs, and dense character psychology” might even be considered the novel’s equal (9). *Mad Men* is one of those series. However, the most convincing testimony of *Mad Men*’s “literariness,” might not be obtained from the series itself, but from how it has been “read” – viewed, dissected and analysed by enthusiastic reviewers, opinionated bloggers and, more usefully, critical experts (9). David Lavery discusses the “poetics of *Mad Men*” by means of a comparison of Don Draper and 1950s poet Frank O’Hara, while Deborah Tudor and Gary Edgerton analyse the series for its aesthetic and nostalgic value. In Tudor’s view, the series “depicts the postmodern, neoliberal commodified life” (335). According to Edgerton, the series offers “an alternative mythology to the overly simplified [...] books, films and television programmes that bathe the ‘greatest generation’ in the unreflective mist of nostalgia” (xxvi).

In her article on *Mad Men*, Allison Perlman also discusses the nostalgic value of the series, but unlike Tudor and Edgerton, she juxtaposes the beautiful scenery with “the ugliness of its characters’ actions.” Perlman emphasises the allure of the “clothing and hairstyles,” the “drinking and smoking,” as well as the fascination with “sexist barbs” and the “blindness of the racial discrimination” (209). Furthermore, Perlman claims that *Mad Men* has “paratexts” – paratexts that are there to convey the series’ “history lesson,” and “right the wrongs” that do not get addressed overtly in the series itself (210, 222). David Marc supports Perlman’s view, suggesting

that “*Mad Men* can be mistaken for a self-consciously retro prime-time soap” but that “loyal viewing reveals a complex hybrid drawing energy from multiple sources” (227).

Yet another approach is that of William Siska and Nicky Falkof, who both discuss the series’ portrayal of masculinity and American culture in the 1960s. Siska argues that *Mad Men* offers “a stern, even subversive critique of American capitalism and consumer culture,” and “Don Draper,” he continues, is “a ‘new-old’ romantic leading man, in the mould of iconic strongmen of few words” (196-98). Falkof contemplates *Mad Men*’s connection with manhood through Don Draper as well, but also looks at the women in his life – women that play a disruptive but important role; “the show’s subtle wit and complex plotting reveal the [...] archetypes, subverting this proto-masculine iconography” (31). By pushing its male characters “so clearly into a standard structure of masculinity,” the series, according to Falkof, “makes them the object of its scrutiny” (34).

Critics other than Siska and Falkof have paid attention to the role of masculinity in *Mad Men*, and some of them, like Edgerton, might even have mentioned the concept of the ‘self-made man’. Furthermore, Perlman and Marc are not alone in discussing the series’ multiple layers. However, not one of these critical essays has yet properly addressed *Mad Men*’s depiction of the self-made man through its leading man Don Draper, or the series’ use of contexts and subtexts to discuss this particular archetype.

## 1.2 METHODOLOGY

To begin, I shall provide an understanding of the American myth of the self-made man and its cultural-historical context. I shall examine the concept of the self-made man in American history, politics, and literature, as put forward by Irvin Wyllie, John Cawelti, and Richard Poirier amongst others. In the following chapter, I shall discuss the myth of the self-made man in *Mad Men* by making use of two approaches. First, I shall apply Richard Weiss’s analysis of

‘predominant characteristics’ in Horatio Alger’s ‘rags-to-riches’ stories. Second, I shall ‘read’ *Mad Men* in the light of John Fiske’s theory of dominant ideology and cultural codes in television. Both Weiss’s six ‘predominant characteristics’ and Fiske’s conceptions of cultural codes and ideology can be applied to illustrate how *Mad Men*’s creator, Matthew Weiner, counters the myth of the self-made man. In my analysis, I shall explore all seasons of the series, but only particularly discuss pivotal episodes. Finally, I shall consider the decade in which *Mad Men* is set, as well as the decade in which the series was created, and argue their connection to the series’ depiction of Don Draper as a self-made man. In this discussion, Koben De Keere’s historical content analysis of professional advice literature and its representation of self-made manhood before and after the 1960s is particularly helpful.

## 2. THE AMERICAN MYTH OF THE ‘SELF-MADE MAN’

The legendary hero of America is the self-made man. [...] He represents our most cherished conceptions of success, and particularly our belief that any man can achieve fortune through the practice of industry, frugality, and sobriety.

(Wyllie 6)

Though it is an emphatic American belief that the self-made man is unique to its soil, the concept had been widely established all over the world long before it reached American shores; especially in the older societies of Europe where centres were created “for testing, sifting, and distributing individuals within various social strata” (Wyllie 10). However, it was the United States where the notion of the self-made man was first voiced by Senator Henry Clay in 1832 to “identify a class of rising manufacturers who served as symbols of the opportunities of the new industrial age” (OED 2016, Wyllie 153). Furthermore, the self-made man has become a much bigger household name and sought-after ideal in America than anywhere else in the world.

According to the American concept of the self-made man, “those who achieved success in America did so not as a result of hereditary privilege or government favouritism as in Europe, but through their own intelligence and hard work” (*OED* 2016, Foner 348). The marketable ideal of American self-making evolved into a narrower definition though; “Analyse the elements of it,” a British onlooker remarked in 1885, “and you will see that success is identified to some extent with fame; still more with power; most of all, with wealth” (Wyllie 9). Nearly half a century before, Alexis de Tocqueville had made the same observation:

In America, then, every one finds facilities, unknown elsewhere, for making or increasing his fortune. The spirit of gain is always on the stretch, and the human mind, constantly diverted from the pleasures of imagination and the labours of the intellect, is there swayed by no impulse but the pursuit of wealth (852).

Thus, the self-made man became predominately associated with America, wealth, and social success.

The concept of the self-made man developed into a myth at the heart of the ‘American Dream’, and according to Aaron Duncan, “only those stories that have reached the status of public dreams, and provide meaning to life take on the status of a myth” (42). Duncan uses John Cawelti’s analysis to explain the American myth of the self-made man. First, Cawelti claims, the myth represents “the values of individual and social virtue as personified in Benjamin Franklin.” Franklin’s story of a boy from humble beginnings rising to a man who wants to “better both himself and his society” forms the core of the myth of the self-made man and the base of America’s “democratic values.” Secondly, there is the “conservative Protestant ethic” of “America’s founding fathers” that is directly connected to the “formation of the myth of the self-made man, sense of thrift, and knowing the value of a hard-earned dollar.” Lastly, Cawelti explains, the American myth of the self-made man is related to the stories of Horatio Alger. Alger’s work tells the fictional tales of “an individual from meagre status” that works himself up to a man of “great success and wealth” (Duncan 44-46).

## 2.1 THE 'SELF-MADE MAN' RISES

On 29 June 1869, the politician James A. Garfield gave a speech for the graduating class of the Spencerian Business College in Washington, DC. In this speech, he addressed how, only in America, “poor boys continually rose to displace those riding the crests.” Not long after, James A. Garfield became president of the United States – “his own rise from a log cabin to the White House” providing evidence for his statement (Wyllie 8). As Wyllie emphasises, Garfield’s words would probably not have been considered groundbreaking at the time; the life stories of men such as John Jacob Astor and Cornelius Vanderbilt being common knowledge. What is more, the reverence felt for self-made men, and the aspiration to follow in their footsteps, had been a part of American society long before the Civil War (8-9). As Rodney Hessinger points out, the American Revolution and the market revolution had weakened traditional ideas of social-economic order and “American men increasingly tied masculinity to their own ability to succeed in a competitive economic arena” (412). At this time, men like Benjamin Franklin and Andrew Jackson became examples of manhood – representations of men, who displayed the “democratic opportunities” of their times by attaining “political and economic power without relying on religious institutions or family background” (Glass 363, Foner 356). Especially Franklin’s “astonishing rise from poverty and obscurity to worldwide renown and influence” came to be a wistful aspiration for the future; the self-made man as a counterforce against the more refined and established “aristocratic masculinity” of previous role models such as Washington, Jefferson, and Monroe (Glass 363, Hessinger 412). It goes without saying that the political and economic arena was generally not considered a proper place for women. Men and women were supposed to function in ‘separate spheres’ and there was a clear gender hierarchy in social, economic, and political realms. Thus, the ideal of self-making, at least the virtuous kind, was at this time in American history strictly confined to the man.

Despite the veneration of the archetype in the centuries before, the true age of the ‘self-made man’ was the nineteenth century (Foner 394). “Young men, no longer sure of inheriting

their father's land or trade, were increasingly forced into the urban world of business to seek their independent fortunes" (Eagle 306). As Hessinger argues, more often than not, a man's value was measured by his "economic success" and how much of it was accomplished by "his own efforts" (412). It was, once again, Benjamin Franklin's self-constructed framework of "industry, frugality, hard work, and, above all, self-control" – now personified in Abraham Lincoln – that moulded the concept of the American self-made man. However, with the expansion of "industrial and corporate capitalism," the self-made man became more and more linked to the commercial enterprising of celebrated businessmen like Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller (Glass 364, Carroll 274, Eagle 306). Entrepreneurial American men pursued the American Dream "offered by the market revolution," hoping to follow into the footsteps of John Jacob Astor, son of a poor German immigrant, who died in 1848 "the richest man in the United States" (Foner 347-48).

Not unimportantly, the zeal for success and wealth could openly count on the approval of religious institutions, particularly in New England, where Puritan ministers vowed that God blessed worldly commercial ventures, and "rewarded virtue with wealth" (Wyllie 12). "The American," Wyllie states, "will argue that a man can accomplish more good with money than without it, that money is practically a prerequisite for happiness, and that he has heard clergymen say that no man is more pleasing unto God than the morally upright millionaire" (6). Christian minister Russell H. Conwell, in his many times repeated lecture "Acres of Diamonds" (1870), passionately defends a form of "Christianized capitalism" also known as the "Gospel of Wealth" (472). In "Acres of Diamonds," he says it is people's "duty to get rich," and he refers to rich men as possibly "the most honest men you find in the community." Men with "the largest salary," he continues, "can do the most good with the power that is furnished to [them]" (475-76). So the pursuit of wealth was stimulated and actively supported by Calvinist spokespersons – "in the religion of success poverty became the equivalent of sin" (Wyllie 22).

Another important influence on the rise of the self-made man was the cult of ‘advice literature’, which, according to Jay Mechlin, provides “important evidence of prevailing historically and socially conditioned expectations regarding appropriate masculine conduct.” Many of these “advice-manuals,” such as those of Sylvester Graham and William Alcott, Mechlin states, were largely based on a dogmatically pious rhetoric (13). However, there were also plenty examples of self-help books of a more worldly nature, evident in the numerous autobiographies that were published – Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* (1791, 1818, 1868) and showman P.T. Barnum’s *Struggles and Triumphs* (1874) being two of the most renowned (Barnum 477). Promoters of these self-help books firmly believed that the abundant possibilities in American society could turn every man into the self-made man he envisioned for himself. As Wyllie puts it, “if any youth of the Gilded Age failed to achieve a position of wealth and eminence, it was not for lack of printing advice” (117). Once again, men marginalized the role of women in the ‘public sphere’; employing “the allegedly uniform sensitivity of women” as an excuse “to justify their exclusion from certain domains of public life” (Ibsen 413). Women were only expected to manage the ‘self-making process’ of their men in the “private domestic sphere” by offering them “a place of warmth” and “moral and emotional regeneration,” as well as a refuge from “the competitive marketplace” (Eagle 306).

Writers of fiction embraced the concept of the self-made man as well and were largely responsible for the propagation of it. As Poirier claims, “for the only time in history [literary] men could [...] actually believe in their power at last to create an environment congenial to an ideal self” (17). Horatio Alger, Jr. is one of the writers who became closely tied to these popular ‘rags-to-riches’ stories. Alger’s tales of poor city boys climbing to important and profitable ranks in society “encouraged [...] the myth of the self-made man, and the notion that hard work would assure business success” (Arthur 25). Author Timothy Shay Arthur, one of the most productive and successful authors of nineteenth-century America, also wrote about the upcoming “world of commercial business and the self-made man” (Castagna 35). “We want the history of our self-

made men spread out before us,” Arthur stated, so “that we may know the ways by which they came up from the ranks of the people” (Wyllie 13). Thus, marketed as a symbol of “character and self-determination,” the self-made man grew out to be a sturdy ambition for generations of white American men in general, and upcoming American authors in particular (Arthur 25).

Within years the myth of the self-made man had begun to dominate not only history books and autobiographies, but fictional storytelling as well.

## 2.2 CRACKS

Late in his life, F. Scott Fitzgerald warned his daughter about the impulse to close your eyes for the responsibilities of the past: “There is in the history of this archetype [of the self-made man] a terrible desire to wash one’s hands and those of future generations of the crimes committed in the name of America’s foundation” (qtd. in Wyllie 134). James Fenimore Cooper, Henry David Thoreau and Edgar Allan Poe, before him, had expressed a preference for “farmers above businessmen,” and plenty of nineteenth-century men of literature did not hide their contempt for the self-made man and his ethics (Wyllie 135). Ralph Waldo Emerson advocated self-reliance “as the basis of American manhood” (Hessinger 412). However, Emerson also emphasized that to “be a man” is to “be a nonconformist,” and he accused society for “conspir[ing] against the manhood of every one of its members” by putting value on false securities and possession (Emerson 271). Poe, described the self-made businessman as “a methodical, unimaginative drudge, and a deadly enemy of genius,” and Nathaniel Hawthorne considered it a shame that Benjamin Franklin’s intellectual heritage in America resided “almost entirely on [...] sayings which are all about getting money or saving it.” This, Hawthorne claimed, “teach[es] men but a very small portion of their duties.” American Transcendentalist, James Russell Lowell, too, uttered the “hope” that one day American citizens would realize that

“self-made men had not been divinely commissioned to fabricate the higher qualities of opinion on all possible topics of human interest” (qtd. in Wylie 138-39).

However, as an ideal, the nineteenth-century self-made man had more friends than foes and few authors expressed their condescension in their literary work. Author Oliver Wendell Holmes acknowledged that “it were better to be self-made than not made at all,” but revealed that he would never consider the self-made man “as the equal of the educated man who had inherited family traditions and the cumulative humanities of several generations” (qtd. in Wylie 138). It is apparent that the most ardent attackers of the concept “spoke as voices from the past,” “glorifying” a time long gone, and therefore had only “limited appeal” (133). Moreover, since the market arena opened all kinds of new doors and provided irresistible chances for everyone, it was not difficult to consider the self-made man “a friend of democracy and an enemy of privilege” (Hessinger 412). As Wylie explains, only when enquiring ‘muckrakers’ began to investigate “the statistical probabilities of success, [...] the methods of the money-makers, and [...] the social origins and consequences of great fortunes” that the myth of the self-made man started to lose some of its shine “in the eyes of the masses” (141).

In American literature too, authors like Edith Wharton and Theodore Dreiser began to comment on the flipside of ‘progress’. Wharton and Dreiser, “anticipating Fitzgerald and still later American novelists” and filmmakers, hinted at “bedazzlement” with a society which destroyed “their even more bedazzled heroes” (Poirier 212). According to Poirier, twentieth-century American authors tried to convey that “the concept of the Self” was enchanted and ruined “by the power of wealth of the City” (213). However, only a few authors directly targeted the cult of self-making through stories featuring self-made men with dubious pasts and questionable characters. William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and George Stevens’s film, *A Place in the Sun* (1951) – based on Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* (1925) – are examples of stories featuring men who try to create their own interpretation of the American Dream. *Absalom, Absalom!* describes the rise and fall of Thomas Sutpen, a poor white southerner

who moves to Mississippi in the expectation to gain wealth and power. Sutpen fulfils his dream but in the process becomes an example of an unsympathetic man who accomplishes his goals by cunning and deceit. In the film *A Place in the Sun*, Montgomery Clift's character George Eastman starts out as a poor but amiable character who gets a job in the city and a 'trophy girlfriend' but loses his soul along the way. Both Faulkner and Stevens use the concept of the self-made man to explore the other, not so pretty, face of the American Dream.

More outspoken examples can be found in F. Scott Fitzgerald's work. In his 1920s novels, Fitzgerald investigates "the ideal of self-made American manhood"; his characters portray what happens when male identity is "defined in terms of economic status" (Watts 172-73). Fitzgerald's most famous novel in this regard is *The Great Gatsby* (1925). As Trent Watts points out, "the title of the book, suggesting that Gatsby was a sort of magician, informs readers that Gatsby's manhood is illusory and that the novel is a cautionary fable for believers in self-made manhood" (173). Gatsby is depicted as "the archetypal, if somewhat misguided, self-made man in America" (Decker 52). However, as Decker argues, unlike Benjamin Franklin, Fitzgerald's self-made man is less concerned with living a virtuous life of industry, frugality, and thrift than with the improvement and "external presentation" of his persona (63). Fitzgerald's depiction of Gatsby "undermines traditional narratives of virtuous success" and "contributes to the diminishing authority of the myth of the self-made man in the Twenties" (Decker 63, Poirier 52).

According to Poirier, "the most interesting American stories are an image of creation of America itself [...], they are bathed in the myths of American history: they carry the metaphoric burden of a great dream" (3). Writers rebelling against set paths or questioning traditions play an imperative role in creating a new perspective or "escap[ing] the confinements of an old one"; by looking at American literature as if it were a story itself, each episode explores and revises issues put forward in the "previous one" (27). It seems that American literature subjects the myth of the self-made man to this responsibility as well. As Leo Bersani argues, "the right critical

question is not: what are the dominant images in [...] American literature in general? But rather: what happens to these images”; after all, the most interesting parts of any story are most often the ones “not coherent [...] with the rest” (xv). Matthew Weiner’s *Mad Men* fits this mould perfectly.

### 3. *MAD MEN* AND THE ‘SELF-MADE MAN’

Mr. Draper, I don’t know what it is you really believe in but I do know what it feels like to be out of place [...]. There is something about you that tells me you know it too. (‘Rachel Menkin’ in *Mad Men* 1:1)

The very first episode of *Mad Men*, “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,” starts with a short explanation of how the term Mad Men came into existence: “Mad Man, a term coined in the late 1950s to describe the advertising executives of Madison Avenue” (1:1). The 1959 Platters’ song “smoke gets in your eyes” is a possible idiom for being ‘blinded’ or ‘deluded’, and to coin a term, is to create something new. These two elements in the introductory episode of *Mad Men* foreshadow the world the viewer is about to enter and the man (s)he is about to meet: a self-created image that will have you questioning what is real and what is not. However, this interpretation of the season’s premiere might not have come across properly without the essential cultural background knowledge. As Falkof points out, it is “through a clever referencing” that the creators of *Mad Men* can make you think about “what is being shown and what is actually going on” (33). In this sense, Matthew Weiner and his colleagues make good use of what John Fiske calls codes – a “system of signs, whose rules and conventions are shared among members of a culture” to “make sense of reality.” According to Fiske’s theory on ‘dominant ideology’ and ‘cultural codes’, codes are used to “connect producers, texts, and

audiences” and convey, either overt or covert, “meanings that constitute our cultural world” (“Television Culture” 1088).

The “categories of codes are arbitrary and slippery,” but nevertheless very useful in the support of viewer interpretations of television shows (1088). Codes can therefore be a valuable tool in the ‘reading’ of *Mad Men* and the character of Don Draper as a self-made man in particular. After all, as Ronald Barthes points out, “a myth” is “a chain of related concepts”; it “relies for its second-order meaning on the fact that this myth [...] is common in the culture” – it finds its place within a dominant ideology with its own cultural codes (qtd. in Fiske, *Introduction* 88). In *The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale* (1988), Richard Weiss has analysed the ‘predominant characteristics’ of the self-made man in Horatio Alger’s stories and has distinguished six characteristics: “honesty,” “self-reliance,” “kind[ness],” “the ability to forgive,” “optimism,” and “thrift” (Duncan 46). Weiss’s characteristics subscribe to Fiske’s theory of cultural codes, for they are “representational convention[s]” of “the ideological code” of the myth of the self-made man (Fiske, “Television Culture” 1090).

### 3.1 MEET DON DRAPER

According to Fiske, one of the most influential elements in television is the ‘code of editing’. The code of editing means that, in line with convention, the heroes of a story are “given more time than the villains” and “more shots”; a practice that is proven to be “remarkabl[y] [...] consistent [...] across different modes of television” (1091). In agreement with the code of editing, it is obvious that, despite the numerous characters and subplots, the character of Don Draper is the supposed hero of *Mad Men* and therefore, the man to watch. Watching Don Draper is not a particularly difficult thing to do. Don has charming good looks and moves in a Kodak-perfect realm – a world that “comes complete” with a beautiful WASP wife, a “suburban colonial house,” and a “substantial bank account” (Tudor 337, Siska 199). This picture-perfect

life is beautifully displayed in season one's finale "The Wheel," when Don's life is literally used as an advertising campaign. Don's life breathes success. Besides in appearances, this success manifests itself in happy clients, encouraging awards, and the admiration from the people around him. The women in Don's life envision Don as the poster boy of the masculine ideal. Rachel Menken, Don's client and mistress, gives Don a set of cufflinks cast in the mould of medieval knights (1:3), and Betty Draper, his wife, likes to see him "like that, how other people see you" (1:2). This admiration does not stop with the female gaze. As Falkof claims, Don's "ideas" are considered "sacred" and both the male colleagues and partners of Sterling Cooper are constantly trying to keep Don happy (35) – "Don is feted by Sterling Cooper as the embodiment of the American Dream" (Siska 201). When Pete Campbell informs the partners about Don's stolen identity, Bertram Cooper replies with the words "This country was built by worse men than what you're claiming here" (1:12), and Peggy Olson, one of Don's protégées, claims that "whatever Don does or doesn't do, [...] is for a good reason" (2:12). Research shows that audiences are "clear about the different characteristics of television heroes and villains on two dimensions only: heroes [are] more attractive *and* more successful than villains" (Fiske, "Television Culture" 1091). So, Don's appealing "appearance is [...] encoded by our social codes of ideology" (92); besides screen time, the cultural codes of beauty and wealth are there in *Mad Men* to support the viewer's interpretation of Don Draper as a heroic figure.

Don's success, wealth and admiration are brought about by sheer determination, albeit accompanied by a healthy dose of talent. "I've always envied that," Roger Sterling tells Don in one of the very last episodes, "you're always reaching," to which Don replies: "I've always envied you for not having to" (7:11). Don is a self-made man who fits the profile of Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches stories. Through flashbacks, we learn how Don, as the 'bastard' son of a poor rancher and a prostitute – roles embedded in a cultural image of rural poverty and degradation – has become the creative genius of Sterling Cooper Advertising Agency. Don's self-made status sets him apart from most of the other men in the office, and even though he tries to hide the

specifics of his past, Don takes pride in his self-making and has little respect for those who never had to work very hard in life. This is nicely illustrated when Don openly favours Nixon over Kennedy, because “Nixon is from nothing, self-made man, the Abe Lincoln of California” – with “Kennedy,” Don continues, “I see a silver spoon. Nixon, I see myself” (1:10). Another apt example is Don’s initial animosity towards Pete Campbell, a young and ambitious man from a privileged background. Don puts Pete in his place with the words “You’ve been given everything. You’ve never worked for anything in your life” (1:12), while he openly gives credit to Peggy Olson, a young ambitious woman from, like himself, humble beginnings (1:8). Don’s appreciation of self-making and his self-made status are “embodiments of ideological values” that form an ideological code for what in American culture has become the representation of the ideal man (Fiske, “Television Culture” 1092). Don Draper is not only set up to be the hero of the story, he is also a representation of a mythologized cultural archetype.

### 3.2 THE FALL OF A MAD MAN

“Who is Don Draper really?” is the question a journalist asks Don at the start of Season Four. Don answers with “I’m from the Midwest. We were taught that it’s impolite to talk about yourself” (4:1). It is, however, as Falkof points out, this question that “underpins” most, if not all, “of the series” (34). Though we know Don is a charming man, self-made, and living a life of success, in contrary to the other characters, the audience is persistently challenged to question who Don Draper really is. Don does not talk much about himself, and even his own wife wonders who the man is lying beside her (1:2). The viewer does not obtain a lot of information about Don, and what the audience does get to see is on occasion thoroughly contradictory and confusing. Novelist Barbara Kingsolver says, “The most interesting thing about a character is what we don’t know about him” (qtd. in Siska 198). Through flashbacks of Don’s life – Don as a boy, a soldier, a young man – and his undertakings as a “Madison Avenue Legend,” we gradually

learn about the mystery that is Don Draper (Falkof 34). It is through this “heighten[ing]” of the “drama,” as Siska calls it, that we learn that Don Draper is not the self-made man in the traditional, Horatio Alger, sense of the word (198).

The first sign of the subversion of Don as the characteristic self-made man is Don’s dishonesty coded in his identity theft. In truth, Don Draper is Dick Whitman – a reference to the all-American, all-encompassing poet Walt Whitman – someone who adopted Don Draper’s identity to get away from his poverty-stricken past. The other inescapable sign of Don’s dishonesty is the flow of affairs he has during his marriages to Betty and Megan. This secretive side of Don is contrasted by his behaviour in his relationship with Anna Draper, the widow of the real Don Draper. Though their connection is strictly platonic, with Anna Don is honest: “I’ve told you things I’ve never told Betty” (2:12). With Anna “Don is a different person,” and “clearly, the Don we see in [the scenes with Anna] is meant to represent some type of ‘authenticity’ that Don Draper, ad executive,” and suburban husband “does not possess” (Falkof 37). As Fiske argues, “In a society that places a high value on a man and women being a close couple” the having of an affair or confidante outside the committed relationship can be interpreted as a break from present-day Western “dominant ideology” (“Television Culture” 1093). The identity theft, the affairs and the juxtaposing scenes with Anna are clear technical and social codes designed to manifest Don’s dishonesty.

Don’s identity theft and adulterous behaviour not only evoke suspicion about Don’s integrity, they also give reason to question his self-reliance. As it turns out, we learn that Don did not get his first job with Sterling Cooper by hard work but by deliberately tricking his future employer Roger Sterling into a meeting (6:12). Moreover, Don’s affairs, as Falkof claims, are codes for his need for, and reliance on, women (36). In the very first episode of the series, Don asks his girlfriend Midge to help him out with his “creative dry spell” because he fears he is “over” and that “they [Sterling Cooper] are finally gonna know it” (1:1). Another example can be found in “the pivotal Clio Awards episode,” when Don “uses women as a means of both

celebration and recovery” – going “to bed with one stranger,” and waking up “with another” (36). One of the most striking examples of Don’s reliance on women, however, occurs with the death of Anna Draper, his confidante. Instead of mourning the loss of the one person who “made [all of it] possible” (2:12), Don asks his secretary to marry him and tries to bury Anna’s death as quickly as possible (4:13); after all, “Mourning is just extended self-pity” (1:6). As Falkof argues, Don has a “compulsion to be seen and known by women,” which punctures the image of “his masculine self” and subverts the highly valued male ability of self-reliance (37-38). The trickery and affairs are deliberate attempts to confuse the audience in its view of Don Draper and “undercut any certainty we may think we have” of a self-reliant Don “lurking beneath the artifice” (Tudor 336).

Another indication of Don’s undermining of the traditional self-made man is his dual personality. Though Don has the capacity to be utterly charming, he also has the ability to be completely unsympathetic. As Siska suggests, “Don veers so close to being an unsympathetic protagonist [...] that he seems sometimes not worth the effort of the characters close to him or similarly of viewers to stay with him” (199). A good example of this is a scene from “The Marriage of Figaro” – an episode about dishonesty and infidelity, and reference to Mozart’s opera by the same title – when Don leaves his daughter’s birthday party to collect a cake and chooses not to come back until after all the guests have gone (1:3). Another example is Don’s reunion with his younger half-brother Adam Whitman. When Adam comes to call on Don unexpectedly, Don turns him down and offers him his life savings to disappear: “make your own life” (1:5). As a result of Don’s rejection, Adam kills himself (1:11). As Falkof suggests, these incidents can simply be “added to the list of bad behaviours that accompany Don’s decline” (40). Don prefers dates to an evening with his children; he changes girlfriends without blinking an eye; and though he openly supports the advancement of his female colleagues in the office, he is less enthused about the independence and advancement of the women in his personal life. Don tries to convince both Betty and Megan that he knows what is best for their careers. This “convention

by which women are shown to lack knowledge which men possess [...] is an example of the ideological code of patriarchy” (Fiske, “Television Culture 1090). Don Draper, as the star of the show, enjoys “none of the moral character usually ascribed to the hero” (Falkof 35). Such a display of unsympathetic behaviour and male chauvinism immediately evokes suspicion with any present-day audience.

Don’s lack of sympathy closely connects to his inability to forgive. Don clearly has never forgiven his caretakers for his childhood years and throughout almost the entire series, Don has difficulty forgiving people in general. In the episode “Red in the Face,” Roger Sterling makes a pass at Don’s wife Betty, and Don takes his feelings, as well as his bruised ego, out on her. He calls Betty “a little girl” and keeps reminding her of his discontent with ‘her behaviour’. With Roger he engages in some male competition so he, in his perspective, can at least set the record straight – the end song “when you butcha me, I butcha you” hints that forgiveness is not Don’s strongest attribute (1:7). A similar reaction from Don occurs when Megan, his second wife, throws Don a surprise birthday party. Don is not pleased about the party and his colleagues’ *double-entendres* about his wife’s seductive musical performance for to the assembled guests. With spiteful commentary and evasive behaviour, Don makes sure Megan does not forget it, and Roger as well has to accept Don’s wrath (5:1). In the episode “The Quality of Mercy” Don’s behaviour makes even Peggy Olson, one of his most faithful followers, call him “a monster” (6:12). As Fiske points out, action is an important bearer of codes in television (“Television Culture 1093). Don values, even needs, admiration from the people around him, and these scenes in which Don lashes out at the people closest to him can be considered signs of Don’s difficulty to forgive.

Another hint that Don is not the conventional self-made man can be found in Don’s rather nihilistic worldview. To Don “the universe is indifferent” (1:8) and “change is neither good nor bad” (3:2). Don does not believe in “the big lightning bolt to the heart,” and “the reason you haven’t felt it,” he says to Rachel Menkin, “is because it doesn’t exist”; “What you call

love was invented by guys like me to sell nylons” (1:1) – an example of the advertising world’s own use of codes to seduce and persuade. Don looks at life as one big advertising campaign: “You know what happiness is? Happiness is the smell of a new car. It’s freedom from fear. It’s a billboard on the side of the road that screams reassurance that whatever you are doing is okay. You are okay” (1:1). Don’s optimism is visible only in the conference room when he is presenting a new ad or is trying to bring in a new client. Beyond that, he is of the opinion that everyone is “born alone” and “die[s] alone” (1:1). On numerous occasions, Don tries to escape his pessimistic outlook on life. He proposes to Midge they pack up and leave for Paris as soon as difficulties arise (1:12), and he asks Megan to start over with him in California so they can be “homesteaders” and “happy again” (6:13). These moments draw upon Don’s own intermittent belief in the images of the American Dream. As Faye Miller aptly remarks, Don “only likes the beginning of things” (4:13) – a coded quality difficult to unify with the conventional optimism of Horatio Alger’s self-made man.

Finally, there Don’s lack of thrift. Don’s financial situation facilitates his need to escape. Money to Don is a means to an end; it buys status, control, and even happiness. With both Betty and Megan, he lives a life reflecting his financially-secure situation and in both marriages he makes sure his wives are not short of anything that money can buy. “You got everything you ever wanted!” he shouts at Betty when she asks him for a divorce (3:13). Later, Don, once again, uses money as a means; this time to end his quarrels with Betty. Money is Don’s way of fixing things. He gives Midge a few hundred dollars in a last attempt to save her from her heroin addiction (4:12), and he tries to fix Lane Price’s suicide by handing his widow a \$5000 cheque. Moreover, Don is frivolous about money. As a severance gift, he hands Midge the bonus he negotiated from Bertram Cooper (1:8), and he voluntarily pays for Pete Campbell’s share in the company takeover (4:12). As the series moves forward, we see Don, more frequently and more openly, spend large amounts of money on his hedonistic lifestyle, and on numerous occasions Don’s money buys him a privileged treatment. The end of the episode “The Hobo Code” is

embellished with the song “give me that old time religion” – the religion of money – the ‘Gospel of Wealth’ (1:8). Don’s spending is encoded with the message that he does not value the dollar beyond what it can buy him right here, right now.

Don Draper is, as Faye calls him, indeed a “type” (4:5). Don is “the self-made man, [...] one of the foundational forms of American masculinity, the archetype that depends on the self-contained and self-sustaining potential of the male” (Falkof 35). Don Draper himself is very much aware of this role he is to play: “I know how you want to see me” (7:3). His performance is aided by the way he and his life is depicted; the technical codes such as “camera work, lighting, setting” etc., and the social codes of appearance and presence make up the going dominant ideological code of the heroic self-made man (Fiske, “Television Culture” 1092). However, by applying Weiss’s characteristics, honesty, self-reliance, kindness, the ability to forgive, optimism and thrift, it becomes exceedingly clear that Don Draper does not in fact fit the mould of the mythologized self-made man at all. As Edgerton suggests, “Don recalls an old American character who rises above his modest station in life by hard work and talent, charm *and* deception” (xxx). As the series advances, the effect of Don’s deviant behaviour becomes evident in the way both the audience and the people around him start to ‘see’ him. The “archetype” of the self-made man is gradually “undermined” and it becomes apparent that Don Draper is “incapable of living up to th[e] image” (Falkof 41). Weiss’s characteristics of the self-made man are challenged with the clever use of Fiske’s cultural codes and theory of dominant ideology. *Mad Men* questions the revered myth of the self-made man by depicting Don’s rise as his fall.

#### 4. SELF-MADE MAD MEN AND THE SPIRIT OF THE TIMES

Now I am quietly waiting for the catastrophe of my personality to seem beautiful again, and interesting, and modern. (‘Don Draper’ in *Mad Men* 2:14)

For a long time in American history “self-development” had stood for the “cultivation of willpower” and “perseverance” – “the self” perceived as ‘makeable’, ‘malleable’ or ‘pliable’” (De Keere 321). This is predominately visible in the self-help books that were written throughout the centuries. According to a study conducted by Kobe De Keere, the majority of the self-help books published before the 1960s advocates this success through self-made manhood (318). In addition, pre-Sixties’ “advertising” – another snapshot of “American values” – conveys the idea that “hard work would produce success” as well (Schwartz 11-12). However, in the 1960s, “sociologists, business historians, and others” gathered “impressive statistical data” that “prove[d] conclusively” that most of America’s “wealthy citizens” did not ascend from humble beginnings, and that “the self-made man” had always been “the exception not the rule” (Wyllie 174). This conclusion also had an effect on society. De Keere and Schwartz show that in the 1960s – for the first time since the 1920s – there is a noticeable shift in ideas about American self-made manhood in both self-help handbooks and commercials (De Keere 312, 318, Schwartz 12). As Jonna Eagle points out, “the ideology of [...] self-making” became outdated and seized to be the vertebrae of ideas concerning masculinity (307).

Secondly, from the 1960s onwards, the position of women in the public arena changed dramatically as well, and their empowerment became visible in advertisements that “constructed a superwoman image,” as Daniëlle Schwartz calls it. These superwomen – though with “conventional gender roles” intact – represented the women in “professional” domains who would “bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan,” and also “satisfy [their] husband[s] sexually” (12). As Fiske argues, the “concepts that constituted the related myths of masculinity” had “always served the interests of the [...] the class which it advanced – middle-class men”; “the changing role of women in society and the changing structure of the family,” signify “that these myths are finding their position of dominance [...] under challenge” (*Introduction* 90). Self-made womanhood questioned the time-honoured “association” of “the American Dream” with self-

made “manhood,” and the perception of this mythologized archetype became more “elusive, unstable, and problematic” (Arthur 27).

Thirdly, instead of appreciating a person for what he or she can bring, emphasis was now shifting to appreciating a person for who he or she is. As Ralph Waldo Emerson had said a century before, “Men have looked away from themselves and at things so long [...]; they measure their esteem of each other, by what each has, and not by what each is” (Emerson 285). This now changed. From the Sixties onwards, self-help books and advertising would emphasize “the importance of passions, desires and wellbeing in the process of achieving professional success” (De Keere 320). “The most frequent advice,” as De Keere’s studies show, is that you do not “(re)construct” yourself but that you “at all times [...] stay yourself”; “the ‘self-made’ man” was “replaced by the ‘already-made’ man” – a belief that “becomes all the more dominant from the 1990s onwards” (320). According to Edgerton, this ‘New Sentimentality’ – nostalgia for the appreciation of the inner-self – acclaimed “at the dawn of the Sixties,” lost its appeal “by the Eighties and Nineties,” but is very much alive again in the post 9/11 world (xxxii). It is at this threshold of cultural and socio-political changes that *Mad Men* begins.

#### 4.1 TIMES ARE CHANGING

In the episode “Time Zones,” we see Don Draper with Pete Campbell in their Los Angeles office. Pete has fully adjusted to the Californian lifestyle – loving the “vibrations” – while Don looks gravely out of place with his classic, Fifties look (7:1). It is apparent that times are changing and Don is not (yet) changing with them. In Season One’s episode “Babylon,” Don gets into a fierce discussion with Midge’s friends, while a little later he joins them at a performance of the song “Waters of Babylon” (1:6). The title of the episode, Don’s conversations with the bohemians of Greenwich Village, and the song performed at the club, signify the obvious gap between Don and the upcoming counterculture of the Sixties. Don

Draper, figuratively, speaks a different language. In the episode “Lady Lazarus” – named after Sylvia Plath’s poem about suicide, death and resurrection – it becomes clear that Don has no knowledge of, nor any affinity with, modern music such as that of The Beatles (5:8), and at the end of Season Five, the creators of *Mad Men* have Don Draper literally order an ‘old fashioned’ (5:13). Don Draper is a representation of a myth at a crossroads. He advances in a world that is quickly progressing in all kinds of directions and the question is whether Don will shed his old form and resurrect a new man.

*Mad Men* not only depicts the new perceptions of masculinity on the rise in the 1960s, it also addresses the changing balance between the sexes and women’s positions in the public arena. Where Don and his male colleagues have the tendency to ‘drop the ball’, women like Peggy Olson and Joan Holloway fill the gaps and take over the role of self-making. Don does not seem to believe in the words: “In life we often have to do things that just are not our bag” (6:1), whereas Peggy and Joan actually move up in the world by putting in long hours and going through the metaphoric trajectory ‘from mailroom to boardroom’. Moreover, it is Peggy who gives up motherhood so she can focus completely on her career, and it is Joan who is willing to sacrifice even her physical integrity for the good of the company. As Barthes points out, “myths are actually the products of a social class that has received dominance by a particular history” and “they change [...] in order to meet the changing needs and values of the culture of which they are a part” (*Introduction* 89, 91). To use another sports term, Peggy and Joan ‘take up the glove’ despite the difficulties and prejudices they face. As Rachel Menkin slightly sarcastically remarks: “It must be hard being a man too” (1:1).

Sociologist Eleanor Townsley points out that, “The Sixties” were “a definitive break between then and now” and represent a “major change in American history, after which nothing is the same” (qtd. in Edgerton xxviii). It seems that the break between ‘then’ and ‘now’ is also embodied in *Mad Men*’s leading man Don Draper. The character of Don Draper is continually struggling between being an ‘Artisan’ and an ‘Artist’. The Artisan is the traditional self-made

man, who, according to Henry James, Sr., “seeks to gain a livelihood or secure an honourable name” and “works for bread, or for fame, or for both together.” The ‘Artist’, James continues, is an “aesthetic man,” one who “obeys his own inspiration or taste, uncontrolled either by his physical necessities or his social obligations,” as well as avoids emotional commitment (qtd. in Poirier 23). Roger Sterling, on numerous occasions, fights for Don’s place in the company because “he’s a genius!” (7:6), and the fact that Don Draper is “a creative director, not a director of accounts services or a chief financial officer” is a given that cannot be ignored (Edgerton xxxii). Don is a representation of changing perceptions of manhood. He is the man in the ‘grey flannel suit’, an “image” which according to “cultural commentators [...] expressed the paradox of individualism in an age of conformity” (Eagle 308). What better time than that of the changing values of the 1960s – when everybody “just want[s] you to be yourself” (6:1) – to introduce the conflicted American myth of the self-made man.

#### 4.2 DON DRAPER REVISITED

As Edgerton points out, one of the “achievement[s]” of *Mad Men* is how the different characters in the series “embody many of the ways of thinking that were au courant in America during the 1950s and 1960s” (xxiv). However, the characters of *Mad Men*, and Don Draper in particular, are not only representations of their time, they are also representations of our time. “*Mad Men* is a show told in hindsight” (Siska 204); it “shows us things about the Sixties that couldn’t have been shown in the entertainment TV of the Sixties” and it “unapologetically fram[es] its characters’ small personal dramas through the eyes of the present” (Edgerton xxvi). As Robert Thompson remarks, “*Mad Men* [...] presents a readjustment vision of the Sixties that is so different from how we saw it represented the first time around” (xviii). There are several indications that *Mad Men* is as much about the time in which it is set, as it is about the time in which it was created. Joan Holloway and Peggy Olson are representations of the up-and-coming

women's emancipation, but their rise on the corporate ladder is bold even for the 'superwomen' of the Sixties. Betty Draper's university adventure is admirable, but unusual for a 1960s WASP-mother of three. And Don Draper, though obviously flawed, is less of a sexist and a bigot than his male companions – a detail that is plausible, but also highly unlikely in the male chauvinist world of Sixties' advertising. In the closing episodes of the show, the series addresses these anomalies. The creators of *Mad Men* have infused the series with plotlines that can count on sympathy and recognition with a twenty-first-century audience.

This twenty-first-century perspective in *Mad Men* is nicely illustrated with the depiction of Don Draper as the self-made man, as well as the perception of the self-made man by some of the series' characters. In the episode "The Gypsy and the Hobo" Don's British colleague, Lane Price, envies his American colleagues for how "In America, work gives them a chance to succeed without needing to build upon the trappings of family connection, school, social status, etc." (3:37). However, Lane Price commits suicide, as if signalling that the environment he so very much admired comes with a sacrifice of its own. In a meeting with Conrad Hilton, a self-made man as well, Hilton tells Don: "I got everything I have on my own. It's made me immune to those who complain and cry because they can't. I didn't take you for one of them, Don. Are you?" (3:13). Hilton openly questions Don's ability to be, what he considers, an authentic self-made man. In the same episode Don tells Bertram Cooper that he wants to build something of his own, to which Cooper – an Ayn Rand admirer – replies: "I don't know if you have the stomach for the realities" (3:13). What these scenes illustrate, is the message that self-made manhood, especially the one connected to gaining great success and wealth in corporate America, comes at a price; it not only requires hard work and stamina, it also demands a certain cut-throat personality – a perspective that might have been on the rise since the 1960s but resonates particularly with the 2000s. As Duncan suggests, for the twenty-first-century "self-made man," social virtue and the Protestant work ethic have been replaced by a warlike mentality that values skill, deception, and a fervent belief that the ends justify the means" (54).

“The critical nostalgia of *Mad Men*” displays a very unconventional view of “the past,” and self-made manhood in particular; *Mad Men* “uses the language of myth” – the “conventions” of a 1960s setting – to tell a familiar story (Edgerton xxvii). John Rossant suggests that, just as the assassination of John F. Kennedy “seemed to mark the end of one age and the beginning of another,” the chronicles of “history” will report a “before September 11” and “after” as well (qtd. in Edgerton xxxi). *Mad Men* was created in the aftermath of 9/11 and contemporary viewers can relate to the “disorientation of the characters” in the series who, like twenty-first-century viewers, are “trying to make the best of a future that is unfolding before them at breakneck speed” (Edgerton xxvii). The disorientation that Edgerton mentions is cleverly illustrated by the creators of *Mad Men* in the Nixon vs. Kennedy storyline, in which Don Draper and the other men of Cooper Sterling openly support Richard Nixon, while the audience knows that it is “Nixon, in the 1970s,” who will “reveal the amoral vindictiveness behind the self-made man” (Glass 365). Matthew Weiner says about the creation of *Mad Men*: “If I made the show eight years ago, I don’t know if it would have resonated” (qtd. in Edgerton xxi). *Mad Men* needs an audience that like Don Draper is caught between a familiar “recent past and a shadowy uncertain future” (xxvii). What better perspective than that of the 2000s, when audiences are experiencing “The End of an[other] Era” (7.2), to put forward the conflicted American myth of the self-made man.

## 5. CONCLUSION: THE REAL THING

It’s the real thing, what the world wants today. (‘Coca Cola ad’ in *Mad Men* 7:14)

According to Falkof, “*Mad Men*’s tone” is “one of gently poking fun rather than active critique,” and the series “reveals but does not pretend to rewrite the fictive underpinning of the myths of American masculine identity” (44). I would suggest the opposite; *Mad Men* indeed tries

to undermine the myths of American masculine identity and the myth of the self-made man in particular. As authors such as Wyllie and Weiss illustrate,

[N]o figure is more central to our understanding of the American Dream than the self-made man. A recurring character in American history, literature, and popular culture, the self-made man has seemingly always been a part of American culture. (qtd. in Duncan 40-41).

The conviction that anyone can climb out of the trenches of poverty up to the ranks of the wealthy and successful is one of the democratic values present in American culture since its foundation. The choice, therefore, to make Don Draper a self-made man is not an arbitrary one, nor is the world in which he exists – a world that “create[s] illusions,” and where Falkof’s ‘gently poking fun’ actually carries meaning (Siska 200).

Like Jay Gatsby before him, Don Draper is not the archetypal self-made man in the spirit of Benjamin Franklin. Weiss’s six characteristics of this archetype – honesty, self-reliance, kind[ness], the ability to forgive, optimism, and thrift – prove that Don Draper does not fit the traditional mould of Horatio Alger’s rags-to-riches stories. By ‘reading’ Don Draper through the lens of Fiske’s ideological and cultural codes, the audience sees that Don has, not only literally, but also figuratively, a dual identity, and that the life filled with trophy wives and celebrated performances is but a masquerade. Don Draper is evidence of the belief that anyone can become someone, but he also demonstrates that the pursuit of the American Dream is not without consequences. What Robert Carringer so aptly suggests about Jay Gatsby, also holds good for Don Draper. The “very traits which make possible” Don’s “public successes” are “at the same time” the reason why he is “privately miserable”; by attaining “those positions of wealth and power,” Don “sacrifice[s]” his “soul”; in “winning the game,” Don “lose[s]” himself. Like in Fitzgerald’s *Great Gatsby*, the “poignancy” of the self-made man in *Mad Men* lies in this “American paradox” on which it is “founded” (323).

The reverence of the American myth of self-made man in history, politics and literature can be considered “a way of preserving imaginatively those dreams about the continent that were systematically betrayed” by its “economic and political aggrandizement” (Poirier 51). For the traits once attributed to the self-made man were slowly being replaced by other, not so commendable, characteristics:

In the first generation, they were figures of epic magnificence, even when they failed, American Adams engaged in the original creation of a new world. In a later generation, [...] the sons of American Adams became figures bearing the guilt of their cultural heritage, American Cains. (Carringer 323)

On the outside, the myth is shiny and praiseworthy, underneath there are questionable decisions and sacrifices of the soul. “The new version” of the “story” of the self-made man “stresses skill and luck over hard work, greed and success over virtue, and winning above all else” (Duncan 41). As De Keere’s research and other forces in society show, the 1960s mark a time of profound change in the view of American self-made manhood. Don Draper is the representation of this change through a twenty-first-century encoded perspective.

In the episode called “New Amsterdam,” Roger Sterling tells Don to stop “licking some imaginary wound” and to “stop compet[ing]” with guys like Pete Campbell “for the world” (1:4). Don Draper, like the myth of the self-made man, is clouded in ambiguity, and the creators of *Mad Men* address this ambiguity by suggesting that perhaps it is time for an alternative myth. In 1841 Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his essay “Self-Reliance” to “Trust thyself,” that “Nothing can bring you peace but yourself” and “To believe your own thought [...] that is genius” (Emerson 270, 286, 269). Don Draper’s rise as a self-made man causes his downfall, and it is not until Don shuts out the noises and expectations of the myth so greatly admired on the American continent, that what truly matters sets in again: his inner genius, his true self – and as the Coca-Cola advert tells us as the series ends, that is “the real thing, what the world wants today” (7:14).

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