A TROUBLED PAST: RECONFIGURING POSTWAR SUBURBAN AMERICAN IDENTITY IN *REVOLUTIONARY ROAD*, 1961 AND *MAD MEN*, 2007-2012

by

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Julieann Ulin, Department of English, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment for the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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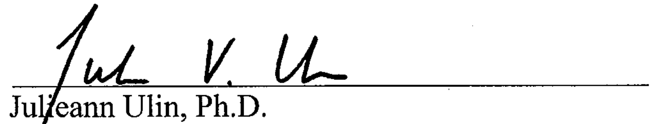

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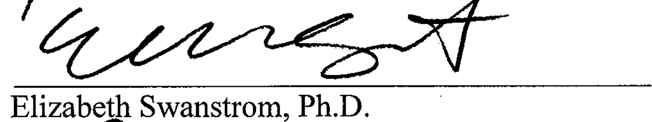

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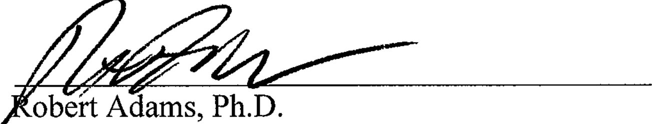

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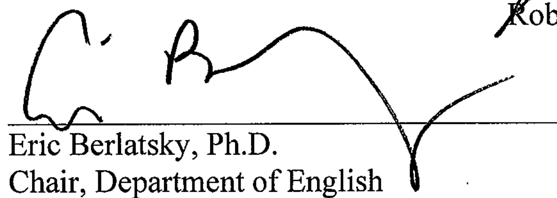

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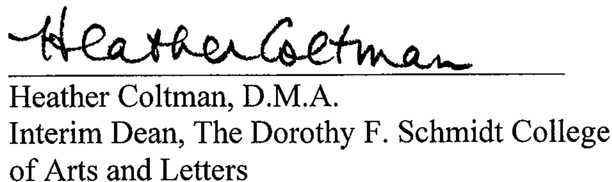

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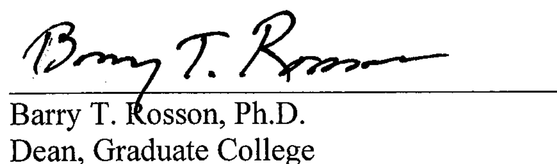

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis takes a cultural studies approach to representations of post-war U.S. suburbia in Richard Yates' 1961 novel *Revolutionary Road*, as well as in the contemporary AMC television series *Mad Men.* These texts explore the postwar time period, which holds a persistently prominent and idealized space in the collective cultural imagination of America, despite the fact that it was a period troubled by isolationism, containment culture, rampant consumerism, and extreme pressure to conform to social roles. This project disrupts the romantic narrative of postwar America by focusing on the latent anxiety within the suburban landscape—by interrogating the performative nature of the planned communities of the 1950s and 1960s and exposing the tensions that were borne out of the rise of domesticity and consumerism. This project explores the descent into a society obsessed with consumerism and conformity, and seeks to interrogate the culture's false nostalgia for the time period.

DEDICATION

This manuscript is dedicated to my selfless and loving husband, Jason, who is always willing to do whatever he can to help me achieve my goals, and who has a seemingly effortless ability to discover the tiniest beam of light, even in the darkest of spaces. Thank you for always pushing me to look for the light.

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INTRODUCTION

The lie of the ideal is of course merely the truth of the masters....is it any wonder that the lie fascinates the minds of men, twisting them to fit its laws until their contortions come to resemble 'natural' human postures? And it is true that man lies because in a world governed by lies he cannot do otherwise: he is falsehood himself, he is trapped in his own falsehood.
--Raoul Vaneigem, The Revolution of Everyday Life, 1967

The period of American history that immediately followed the end of World War II marked a distinct cultural shift in American society as a whole. The postwar society was largely characterized by a move from diversely populated cities into the homogenized, standardized suburbs, as well as by a shift in emphasis on the nuclear family as the ideal image of American life. The move to the suburbs was also coupled with an increased emphasis on consumerism, as material objects such as cars, houses, appliances, and various other goods became symbols for prosperity, success, and happiness, and as such became a critical aspect of creating the illusion of idyllic suburban existence. The period is distinct also with regard to the infiltration and influence of mass media, particularly in the form of television, which began to have a strong influence on American culture, and became a vehicle for advertising and marketing ideas that put utmost value on the "new," and therefore marked the beginning of an era where image began to become more powerful than reality. Cultural theorist Fredric Jameson has written extensively on the Postmodern era and its relationship to the transition into a modern, or in his words, "late capitalism," in which culture itself becomes a vehicle for the promotion of consumption above all else. Jameson describes the anxiety intrinsic to

this transition into a new consumer society in “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”:

> At some point following World War II a new kind of society began to emerge…New types of consumption; planned obsolescence; an ever more rapid rhythm of fashion and styling changes; the penetration of advertising, television and the media generally to a hitherto unparalleled degree throughout society; the replacement of the old tension between city and country…by the suburb and by universal standardization…these are some of the features which would seem to mark a radical break with that older prewar society in which high modernism was still an underground force. (1974)

We see here that the post-WWII society represented such an extreme difference from the society before the war that it is viewed as a period that must be conceptualized separately from what preceded it. For Jameson, the tension created by the “suburb and universal standardization” is indicative of a shift in culture where art, literature, and the architecture of the time period have become unable to exist as a subversive or “underground force,” in the ways that “high modernism” was once able to exist. In other words, the cultural products of the postwar time period cannot escape the fact that they are produced by the established status quo, and they are therefore rendered unable to disrupt or expose that establishment. Hence, in the absence of subversive elements, society is incapable of successfully resisting conformity and standardization, a fact that creates a fundamental feeling of unease and dissatisfaction at being forced to comply with strict social standards. The tension created by the standardized suburbs, as well as the images generated through the consumption of mass media are evident in cultural

productions that focus on the postwar time period—productions that seem to begin to question the idea that American life is capable of producing a meaningful existence at all. Again, Jameson points to this sinking, mysterious air of unease at the mundane insignificance of everyday existence during the postwar era as it even pervades the more artistic productions of the era:

> Here too the content seems somehow to contaminate the form…the misery of happiness, or at least contentment (which is in reality complacency), of Marcuse's 'false' happiness, the gratifications of the new car, the TV dinner, and your favorite program on the sofa—which are now themselves a misery, an unhappiness that doesn't know its name…has no way of telling itself apart from genuine satisfaction and fulfillment since it has presumably never encountered this last. (*Postmodernism* 280).

So for Jameson, the movement toward the typical suburban life marked by consumerism and complacency numbs the inhabitants of that life by lulling them into a false happiness that robs them of the ability to resist oppressive or repressive structures. Here we see "the problem with no name" (57) of Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* extended to encompass not just the women of the era, but rather every person who has become seduced by an all-encompassing consumer society that repeatedly convinces them that they are, or at least should be, happy. Indeed if they are not, it is not because they have ceased to live a meaningful existence, but rather that they must need to engage in more consumption—buy a newer car, a newer house, a newer appliance, in order to attempt to fulfill the "unhappiness that doesn't know its name." In other words, in a society where happiness is dictated by how well one fits into the images perpetuated by the media, a

creeping feeling of unhappiness and dissatisfaction breeds fear and anxiety rather than a true recognition of the reasons for that dissatisfaction. If one is constantly told that if they conform to an image they will be satisfied, yet he or she never reaches that point of satisfaction, they move toward the internal in an attempt to locate the problem, rather than pushing against repressive ideologies that may be the actual cause.

Hence, this thesis, "A Troubled Past: Re-configuring Postwar Suburban American Identity," explores these themes by taking a cultural studies approach to representations of post-war U.S. suburbia in Richard Yates' 1961 novel *Revolutionary Road*, a novel that has recently experienced somewhat of a re-birth after a film version was produced in 2009, as well as the contemporary AMC television series *Mad Men*, which has aired from 2007-present. These texts explore the postwar time period, which, as noted, holds a persistently prominent and idealized space in the collective cultural imagination of America, despite the fact that it was a period troubled by excessive isolationism bred by Cold War paranoia and containment culture, as well as rampant consumerism, extreme pressure to conform to strict social roles, and the outright oppression of women and minority groups.

Nostalgia for the postwar era seems to be a persistent impulse in American cultural productions, despite the fact that for marginalized groups, the era was decidedly less than idyllic. Still, the idealized or romanticized postwar period consistently serves as fodder for literature, television, and film, and seems to maintain a consistent presence in the rhetoric of politicians who wish to wax poetic about the "good old days," which in fact never existed the way they do in these selective portions of the American imagination. Cultural historian Stephanie Coontz has written extensively on re-

evaluating our collective nostalgia regarding the 1950s. In one of her historical studies, *The Way We Never Were: The American Family and the Nostalgia Trap,* Coontz destabilizes and reconfigures the vision of the families of the past by showing us that the idea of the nuclear family is a relatively new one, as is the focus on suburban life, our obsession with consumption, and even the seemingly "traditional" image of woman as homemaker. Coontz sheds light on the fictions that we have created, which seem to conceal the truth about the time period. The postwar era evokes romantic nostalgia on a national level to the point that is not remembered for its injustices, anxieties, and tensions, but is rather idealized as a time of innocence and wealth—a golden age for the American family. Coontz also points to the so-called containment culture of the 1950s as a mechanism for the creation of extreme repression, anxiety, and a feeling of entrapment within the relative isolation of suburban communities and American families:

> Families in the 1950's were products of even more direct repression. Cold War anxieties merged with concerns about the expanded centrality of family life and the commercial world to create what one authority calls the domestic version of George F. Kennan's containment policy…A 'normal' family and vigilant mother became the 'front line' of defense against treason; anticommunists linked deviant family or sexual behavior to sedition. (63)

In other words, any deviation from what was considered to be the normal family was deemed not just strange, but could be grounds for accusations of treason. Conformity to the established norm, the ideal suburban family life, was of utmost importance. Hence, the performative nature of suburban existence was heightened immensely. Maintaining

appearances was necessary not just to avoid gossip, but it was considered an issue of national security.

Jameson also addresses the containment culture of the suburban landscape as the starting point of a "continuum of identical products and standardized spaces" that has carried on into our contemporary culture:

> One has the feeling…that the autonomy of the small town…also functioned as an allegorical expression for the situation of Eisenhower America in the outside world as a whole…secure in the sense of its radical difference from other populations and cultures, insulated from their vicissitudes and from the flaws of human nature…in their violent and alien histories (*Postmodernism* 281).

Here we see that the spaces that existed outside of the large city centers were areas that became symbolic of the broader cultural desire to insulate and protect oneself from the unpredictable and unknown. The suburbs ostensibly provided a homogenized, sheltered space in which one could feel safe from the "vicissitudes" of reality. The word 'alien' here is crucial because it signifies the fear of the unknown external elements that suburban existence purported to keep out. The suburban landscape ultimately creates a crisis for its inhabitants because of its obsession with homogeneity and isolation, so that its residents are forced to conform, or else pretend that they conform with the established status quo so that they do not arouse suspicion. Hence, the suburbs do not breed contentment and community, but instead foster an environment of paranoia, isolation, and anxiety.

Both *Revolutionary Road* and *Mad Men* make attempts at troubling an idealized portrait of postwar America by exposing the highly performative and suffocating nature of existence in suburban spaces. Though *Revolutionary Road* dates from 1961 and *Mad Men* is contemporary, a combined analysis of the two is beneficial for a number of reasons. For one, in the mainstream press, *Revolutionary Road* and *Mad Men* are often linked, especially since the debut of the 2009 film version of *Revolutionary Road*. In fact, many in the press have asserted that the novel *Revolutionary Road* was an inspiration for *Mad Men*: an article in the UK newspaper *The Telegraph* entitled "*Mad Men*: The Most Literary Show on Television," claims that Weiner even handed the novel out to the cast in order to familiarize them with the social background of the time period (Walton).[1] The article also reinforces the inclination to read *Mad Men* as literary text, as it insists that the themes that pervade the series are also present throughout American literature: "More importantly, within those celebrated sixties trappings, this is a television show that's always concerned with, and sometimes explicitly refers to, several recurring and timeless themes in American Literature" (Walton). The scholarly reaction to the series *Mad Men* has therefore been extremely pronounced.[2] Cultural critics and scholars

[1]According to the popular website, Internet Movie Database, *Mad Men* creator Matt Weiner has denied the assertion that *Revolutionary Road* was an inspiration for the show, stating that he read the book after beginning work on the pilot episode.

[2]The literary nature of *Mad Men* has, as previously stated, made it popular contemporary subject matter for literary and cultural critics, who have focused on the series' themes, costumes, settings, and characters in numerous articles. In the previously mentioned collection "*Analyzing Mad Men: Critical Essays on the Television Series*," critics have constructed 12 different articles that are divided into sections such as "The Contexts of Mad Men," "The Politics of Mad Men," and "The Women of Mad Men." Within this collection critics focus on a variety of issues from the television show. Critics Melanie Hernandez and David Thomas Holmberg characterize Don Draper as the latest incarnation of a frontier hero, whose desire to head west is analogous to characters such as Natty Bumpo, Huck Finn, and Jay Gatsby (Hernandez and Holmberg 55). David Pierson focuses on the economics of *Mad Men*, drawing, as I plan to, on Frederic Jameson, and says that the series and the character of Don Draper: "represent a crucial transitional figure for both pre-1970s corporate and post-Fordist, flexible capitalism" (Pierson 72). In the article "'A Mother Like You:' Pregnancy, the Maternal, and Nostalgia," critic Diana Davidson focuses on the series depiction of the often dark vision of motherhood embodied by Betty Draper: "Mad Men shows us motherhood through a historical lens: Weiner and his team give us a show that enables both a remembering of certain kinds of motherhood and/or relief that these experiences of motherhood are in the past" (Davidson 101).

have engaged in dissecting everything from *Mad Men's* portrayal of women and minorities to the cultural obsession with the style of clothing and home décor that is presented on the series, and everything in between. Current critical interest in the series is extremely high; a search through the University of Pennsylvania's call for papers database yields no less than 122 requests for criticism on the series. In addition, well-produced, highly anticipated serialized narratives such as *Mad Men*, as well as series such as *Breaking Bad*, *Game of Thrones*, and *The Walking Dead*, are consistently lauded in the press as replacements for both the feature film as well as the novel.

With this critical willingness to consider media texts as "literary" in mind, my analysis of *Revolutionary Road* and *Mad Men* will allow me to illustrate the tensions of the era from two different perspectives, as well as through two different mediums: a novel that was produced within the period it portrays, and a contemporary television series that attempts to re-create the period through the very act of re-imagining it. *Revolutionary Road* offers us a vision of suburban existence that is mirrored and re-visited in *Mad Men*. The latter seems especially to illuminate the paradoxical nature of nostalgia, in that although the series attempts to expose some of the harsh, bitter realities of the era, it still, seemingly inescapably, fosters a feeling of nostalgia in the viewing public. So that, even in our attempts to deconstruct the nostalgia of the 1950s and early 60s, we are at the same time, recreating and re-inscribing the very nostalgia that we are attempting to deconstruct. Furthermore, while *Revolutionary Road* exists as a text that was created in and about a specific temporal space, *Mad Men* seems to occupy a dual

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The University of Illinois forum "Kritik" takes analysis of the series even further, offering an episode by episode close reading of one entire season of the series. This analysis reinforces the "novelistic" interpretation of the series as well. Still other articles focus on the nature of the television series itself. In "Selling Nostalgia: Mad Men, Postmodernism, and Neoliberalism," Deborah Tudor emphasizes *Mad Men*'s position as a media product: "Mad Men, a contemporary media product situated in media-derived nostalgia, demonstrates how audiences read the past through the post-modern, neo-liberal discourse of style" (331).

temporality. The past as it is depicted in *Mad Men* allows us to re-experience and re-evaluate it—it allows us a method of analyzing the past with the supposed benefit of hindsight, even as it persists in evoking a nostalgia for the very time-period it intends to criticize.

My project disrupts and re-directs a romantic narrative of postwar America by focusing on the latent anxiety found within the suburban landscape—by interrogating the performative nature of the construction of the planned communities of the 1950s and 1960s and exposing the tensions and crises of identity that were borne out of the rise of domesticity as well as a sharp increase in widespread consumerism. By placing my argument into conversation with various critical interpretations, I analyze the discourses of domesticity, consumerism, conformity, and discontent that permeate the themes of the contemporary *Mad Men* along with temporally specific *Revolutionary Road*. I argue that the descent into a society completely preoccupied by consumerism and conformity leads directly to a feeling of emptiness, disillusionment, and meaninglessness in everyday existence. More specifically, I attempt to displace and reconfigure these themes in a way that will offer an explanation as to why they seem to operate so prominently in both temporal spaces, and why a possibly pathological nostalgia for the era persists.

Drawing on the work of Cultural Studies theorists such as Frederic Jameson and Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, I explore how *Revolutionary Road* and *Mad Men* trouble the planned community ideology by exposing the constructed artifice of those communities as well as the false nostalgia the postwar period engenders. Jameson's theories on the intersections of consumerism and nostalgia in the Post-modern era are of particular use here. By examining the historical reality along with cultural nostalgia, I

argue that the performative and constructed nature of the suburban landscape was so powerful an ideal that it has hidden and disfigured the truth about the postwar era. The fractures in this simulated nostalgia are evident, however, in both *Revolutionary Road* and *Mad Men,* both of which evoke atmospheres that are overwrought with tensions, anxieties, isolation, and despair.

Chapter One, "The Petrified Forest: The Tension Between Performance, Identity, and Reality in Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road*" explores the historical as well as the individual themes that are present throughout Yates' text, in which the primary characters, Frank and April Wheeler, utilize escapism, performance, and ultimately violence against the self to attempt to break free of the crushing suffocation of suburban life. In Yates' rendering, Frank Wheeler exemplifies a man who is pushed into a meaningless career and a suburban family life that is fundamentally unsatisfying, while April Wheeler embodies feminine bitterness and longing for a life outside of being a wife and mother. Within this chapter, I argue that the extremely pronounced emphasis on performance, as well as the actual housing and architecture of the suburban landscape, contribute to an obvious critique of the containment, insularity, and isolation of the postwar American suburb as a desolate, desperate landscape. In addition, I move beyond arguments that focus on April's confinement as demonstrative of the feminine discontent of the period, into a broader consideration of the ways in which multiple characters are confined by a suburban space that forces performance and conformity, and therefore breeds artificiality and discontent.

Recent critical work on Yates's novel and women, such as "Richard Yates Fictional Treatment of Women" by Kate Charlton-Jones, has focused on Yates' work as a

fundamental depiction of the often bitter realities of the lives of women of the postwar era, but neglects the role that suburbia specifically plays in constructing this reality. In her article, Charlton-Jones hints at the power of the culture of advertising and a new importance placed on performance, or "keeping up appearances," but focuses exclusively on the effects that performance has on women in the texts. In her examination of not just *Revolutionary Road*, but all of Yates' work, the author finds that: "The role of women, the growth of a materialistic, performative culture led by the increasingly powerful advertising and movie industries, and the small lives of ordinary people coming to terms with the banal tragedies that suggest the pain and complexity of human existence are investigated in all his work" (1). Charlton-Jones' reading of April, as well as some of the fundamental themes present in *Revolutionary Road,* are somewhat analogous to my own interpretation; however, she confines her analysis to the women in the text, while I illuminate aspects of suburban culture, landscape, and architecture that contribute to feelings of desperation and isolation among the novel's characters. The insularity of the suburbs operates as an oppositional force against itself in that its intended effect—that of a strong sense of community—becomes undermined by the impulse to exclude, to protect, to keep *out*. In other words, the suburbs are defined not by the community that they cultivate from within, but rather what they force outside, so that life within becomes a distorted semblance of a community—a community built on fear of the outside, as well as a fear of not conforming to the established norms and structures, rather than a community built on shared experiences and positive attachments.

Hence, in my reading of *Revolutionary Road*, I deconstruct not only the depictions of the female characters, but also draw conclusions about the whole of

suburban existence during the time period, for both the men and the women in the text, in order to expose the ways in which the planned community and its promise of happiness and shared experience fail to live up to expectations, and in fact produce the opposite of what they promise by fostering feelings of isolation, emptiness, and falsity. Therefore, we see that it is not only April who is fundamentally unfulfilled within the containment and isolation of the suburban landscape. Yates offers us devastatingly stifled visions of Frank Wheeler as well as his neighbors, including a decidedly jarring representation of mental illness in the Givings' son, John.

In addition to my analysis of the containment of the suburban landscape, I also expose the shift toward a meaningless existence that permeates the text due to the plunge toward excessive, compulsive consumption. Additionally, I seek to illuminate the simmering resentment and rage created by the pressure to perform in order to conform to strict suburban social standards. Frank and April's bitter anger at the performative nature of their lives manifests itself in the delusion that they will escape the performance by moving to Europe, an escape that is ultimately doomed. The ultimate failure to escape the isolation of the suburban space is therefore also a failure to escape the performance, a failure to somehow escape the disillusioning cycle of bitter dissatisfaction. The image of Europe as an alternate landscape within the text emphasizes that there is a space that is able to simulate a more meaningful existence. The fact that the Wheelers are incapable of escape to Europe is representative of their inability to create a meaningful, fulfilling life for themselves that is not dependent on a constant, suffocating pressure to perform. *Revolutionary Road* ultimately represents a crisis of identity for the whole of the nation, a crisis that is played out in the cloistered, claustrophobic, false ideal of the planned

community. The tension created by the "universal standardization" that Jameson refers to as characteristic of the move to the suburbs during the postwar era therefore eventually leads to crisis within the pages of Yates' *Revolutionary Road*. The novel moves beyond just a general sense of malaise about the state of suburbia; rather, it is dominated by long scenes of performance that are disrupted by violent outbursts of rage at being pushed into that performance. Chapter One of this thesis highlights those moments of rage as emblematic of the simmering crisis as a result of the whole of American society's descent into meaningless consumerism, a state of being that is hinted at in Revolutionary Road, and ultimately brought to complete fruition in the television series *Mad Men*.

If *Revolutionary Road* is representative of tension and anxiety about the transformation of American identity, *Mad Men* represents the result of that transformation. The descent into a society where the meaning of life is reduced to consumption of products has been fulfilled. The key difference between the two texts is that *Mad Men* focuses on the creators and promoters of consumer society, rather than just the participants in it. The result of this focus is that the characters seem more self-aware and, therefore, even more morally ambivalent, though at the same time they appear to have more freedom than the characters in *Revolutionary Road*. In addition, *Mad Men* includes the progression of time and the movement into an era where the status quo does begin to be questioned by society at large, and it is obviously created with the inescapable benefit/burden of hindsight—the ability to the view the past from the seemingly superior position of the future. Indeed, however, it is precisely this comfortingly superior position that needs questioning, as this former collective "self" of postwar America is in actuality a space that we are unable to occupy or question except through the distorted lens of

nostalgia; therefore, any critique of the norms and values of the time period becomes clouded by an irrepressible desire for romanticization.

In Chapter Two, "The Revolution Will Be Advertised: *Mad Men* and the Commodification of a Culture," I examine the contemporary fixation with the postwar time period, which seems to have risen out of a re-emergence of some of the same crises, tensions, and fears that were persistent in postwar America. While it is not surprising that *Mad Men* has recaptured the American fascination with the era, it seems that *Mad Men* also disrupts any attempt to romanticize the period through its critiques of the oppression of women and consumerism, as well as its constant attempts to complicate the very feelings of nostalgia that make the show so popular. The chapter examines *Mad Men* through the lens of Jameson's "nostalgia mode," in which he looks at all postmodern forms of production that seek to re-visit the past as symptomatic of our inability to properly address the present:

> This particular practice of pastiche is not high-cultural but very much within mass culture and it is generally known as the nostalgia film…We must conceive of this category in the broadest way: narrowly, no doubt, it consists merely of films about the past and about specific generational moments of that past…*Star Wars* reinvents this experience in the form of pastiche...it satisfies a deep (might I even say repressed?) longing to experience them again: it is a complex object in which…the adult public is able to gratify a deeper and more properly nostalgic desire to return to that older period and to live its strange old aesthetic artifacts through once again…we have become unable to focus on our own present…an alarming

> and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history. ("Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 1965)

So for Jameson, our impulse to re-experience the past is a re-enactment of our own repression. We somehow need to fulfill a desire for the past in order to reconcile the present—and for Jameson, this is problematic. *Mad Men* is interesting because it does not simply invoke the past while depicting the present, or even the future, the way that a film such as *Star Wars* does, but it actually immerses us in the past even as it attempts to criticize it.

Because *Mad Men* seems to take all of the anxieties of *Revolutionary Road* a step further, its explorations of performance and conformity, alternate landscapes, and identity crisis are intensified. *Mad Men* represents a marked disruption of the pervasive romantic postwar American narrative. *Mad Men* sparks nostalgia in its viewers, but at the same time it offers a bitterly realistic version of the past. However, I also find it interesting to focus on moments within *Mad Men* that push against all of its attempts at disruption. In other words, it seems that there are areas where the oppression of women may be re-inscribed rather than questioned, as well as areas where the glorification of consumption and nostalgia is reestablished as well. *Mad Men* takes the critique of consumerism a step further in that all of the experiences of the lead character, Don Draper, are transformed and reproduced as inspiration for advertisements. Therefore, life experiences on *Mad Men* become nothing more than elements of the creation necessary to persuade society to consume. In the world of *Mad Men,* to live is to consume; consumption becomes the meaning of life itself. This apparent critique of consumerism becomes complicated by

the fact that *Mad Men* the series is a product of the culture industry, and operates as a vehicle for advertising on multiple levels, with stars of the series starring in advertisements that air during broadcasts of the show. This seeming contradiction highlights just one of the many instances of the strange duality of *Mad Men* as a series that seems to attempt to deconstruct and criticize established notions and false nostalgia, even as it continues to reinforce those very same ideals.

Thus, we see the rise of *Mad Men* inspired fashions, *Mad Men* themed parties, a resurgence of the popularity of mid-century furniture, and even attempts at copycat television shows also set in the 1950s and 60s. The strange dual space that *Mad Men* occupies as both critic and creator of nostalgia points to the dysfunction of nostalgia itself, a dysfunction that, according to Jameson, renders us incapable of properly reading history: "Faced with these ultimate objects—our social, historical, and existential present, and the past as 'referent'—the incompatibility of a postmodernist 'nostalgia' art language with genuine historicity becomes dramatically apparent" (*Postmodernism* 19). For Jameson, the fixation on the aesthetic vision is emblematic of our inability to move past our own nostalgia about a particular time period—so that *Mad Men* becomes a vehicle to convey a sense of 'pastness' through a collection of images and material objects, rather than a true critic of cultural history. Still, however, there is a persistent sense that *Mad Men* does seek to tear away at the nostalgia it creates, so the critical viewer is left to interrogate whether the attempt at deconstructing nostalgia from within is ever possible, or if it is always doomed to failure.

The nostalgic impulse is further complicated by the fact that the show uses actual products in its fictional advertising campaigns, a fact that illustrates the contradiction

inherent even in the production of nostalgia that the series seems to at once criticize and create. Again, Frederic Jameson's ideas regarding the postmodern and consumer society become helpful here: "We have seen that there is a way in which postmodernism replicates or reproduces—reinforces—the logic of consumer capitalism; the more significant question is whether there is also a way in which it resists that logic" ("Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 1974). The purpose of this project is to explore and expose the paradoxical nature of *Mad Men* and the nostalgia that it both creates and resists.

In the introduction to the 2011 anthology, *Analyzing Mad Men: Critical Essays on the Television Series,* editor Scott Stoddard summarizes one reason that scholars and critics may have latched on to the series' various themes: "*Mad Men* is a period drama about change just after the mid-twentieth century, which reveals a lot about our response to shifting ideological terrains in the early twenty-first" (5). Stoddard, therefore, situates *Mad Men* within a discourse that reads it for its commentary on the present as well as on the past. This point of view is echoed in an interview with Lauren Goodlad: "Many viewers find *Mad Men's* view of the past compelling, and some see it as providing an accurate, fascinating window into postwar America." Goodlad's emphasis on describing the show as "accurate" illustrates the move toward the disruption of the traditional, romanticized version of the past that Americans have embedded within our consciousness.

By exploring the ways in which *Revolutionary Road* and *Mad Men* offer perspectives on the false nostalgia of the postwar period, I am able to also situate these texts within our contemporary context and explore the ways in which they offer us an

examination of our current identity as well. Through the historical perspective of Stephanie Coontz and Tyler-May, as well as the theoretical perspectives of Jameson and Adorno and Horkheimer, I explore the impulse to revisit and rewrite the past in a way that ruptures the fusion between nostalgia and the real. Ultimately, I explore the idea that both texts engage in a conversation that is overwhelmingly relevant to the ubiquitous nature of consumer society today.

THE PETRIFIED FOREST: THE TENSION BETWEEN PERFORMANCE, IDENTITY, AND REALITY IN RICHARD YATES' *REVOLUTIONARY ROAD*

The novel *Revolutionary Road* opens with a scene in which April Wheeler is starring in a neighborhood production of the play *The Petrified Forest*. Through this opening scene, author Richard Yates is immediately signaling a performative culture—a culture where every action, every facial expression is carefully measured and maintained. It is only in the scenes where Frank and April argue, and through the third person omniscient narration, that we become clued in to the actual emotions and thoughts that are occurring within the characters, though at times, even that information is withheld from the reader, with eventually devastating results. Yates' emphasis on the performative aspects of his characters' lives creates a persistent atmosphere of tension and unease, so that the reader is consistently left uncomfortable and disconcerted. The contradiction that forms as we experience the feeling that things appear to be all right, even as we also sense that they very much are not becomes a masterfully executed metaphor for the contradictions at the very core of suburban existence at the time in which the novel was written. In other words, Yates allows the reader to become immersed within a culture where everything on the surface is performance, so that as the novel unfolds, we are forced to continually wonder when that delicate and barely maintained surface will shatter and the harsh reality of the Wheelers' unhappiness will be forced into the open.

Indeed, within these beginning pages of *Revolutionary Road*, the criticism of pretense, conformity, and consumer culture are strikingly obvious. The focus of the first chapter is on the Laurel Players, the new local community theater, and their presentation of the play *The Petrified Forest*, which is overshadowed in popular culture by a more well-known 1936 film version. The play and the film depict a disillusioned, small-town waitress who longs to move to Europe, and a suicidal customer who also seeks an escape from his banal daily existence. So even before we are (harshly) introduced to the discontent that permeates the Wheelers' lives, we see that they are associated with characters who feel trapped within a mundane existence and dream of escape. In a 2009 article in the *New Yorker Magazine* online, reviewer Vicky Raab recognizes the relevance of the plot of *The Petrified Forest* to the Wheelers' lives: "While I agree that the Wheelers and others in their community are self-dramatizing 'hollow men,' April did go to drama school, and I can see how the lead role's resonance with her own history has infected her psyche and bled into her life, as well as the play's relevance to the Oedipal attitudes of men like Frank and Shep, returning from the Second World War with questions about their masculinity."

So it appears that the inclusion of *The Petrified Forest* within the text of *Revolutionary Road* was a conscious attempt to highlight the inner suffering of the characters in the novel, or to take this idea a step further, the Laurel Players' choice to produce *The Petrified Forest* reflects the desire for a dramatic escape from the tedium of suburban existence. In this way, the production of *The Petrified Forest* functions as a sort of *mise en abyme*, in that the plot of *Forest* creates a mirror effect for the play's performers, hinting at the inherent reproduction, or cycle, that they are trapped within.

Here, the failure of the performance indicates the inability to recognize their reflections in a meaningful or substantive way. It is as if, by selecting the play, they have shown the beginnings of self-awareness, yet they are ultimately unable to productively utilize the images that are generated in order to initiate an escape from the cycle. The importance of the meaning of the play, as well as the community theater as a whole is not unnoticed by the production's audience, who indeed acknowledge that the play will have a deeper meaning for them:

> Anyone could see that they were a better than average crowd, in terms of education and good health, and it was clear too that they considered this a significant evening. They all knew…*The Petrified Forest* was hardly one of the world's great plays. But it was…a fine theater piece with a basic point of view that was every bit as valid today as in the thirties ('Even more valid,' one man kept telling his wife. . .'even more valid, when you think about it'). (Yates 5)

It is clear here that the Players, as well as the townspeople, are looking to *The Petrified Forest* to resonate with their own situations, to allow them to experience the performance as a way to process their own disillusion and dissatisfactions. The evening is about more than just fun or relaxation, it is a quiet exhibition of protest about their own banal lives. Because the play is unable to produce the cathartic effect that both the performers and the audience are in search of, it is a representation of failure to make a breakthrough that will allow them the self-awareness to escape the meaninglessness of their lives.

In the Players' production of *The Petrified Forest*, April Wheeler plays the role of the waitress, Gabby, who sees Europe as her way out of an isolated and depressing world.

As the novel progresses, April too imagines a move to Europe as her only way out of the suffocating suburbs and her oppressive role as wife and mother. The failure of April's performance of Gabby is particularly compelling here because it signals two quite different aspects of her character. First, it allows the reader to quickly and easily perceive that April is not adept at performing the roles that are assigned to her, whether within the context of the play itself or her actual life in the suburbs. It is clear that April is decidedly uncomfortable in the roles that she is assigned. Secondly, it shows us that even the idea of moving to Europe, the escape that she deems so necessary to the success and happiness of her marriage and her future, is not real. In other words, the vision of Europe as an escape does not come from a moment of clarity or an epiphany about the meaninglessness of her life. Instead it comes from a failed performance of a fictional play and therefore demonstrates that April has the ability to consume, but lacks the ability to produce meaning in a constructive or original way. She mindlessly absorbs the images and characterizations of the play, even as she fails to meaningfully identify with the reflected image of herself in the play. So we see that even the escape to Europe that quickly and completely begins to define April's very existence is actually yet another product of a constructed reality—yet another piece of fiction that becomes central to her identity overall. The image, the performance, has overridden reality. April has adopted Gabby's desire to escape despite the fact that she lacks the self-awareness to acknowledge how that desire is created.

Hence, the failure of the performance of *The Petrified Forest* is an indication of the larger failure of performance within the domestic space of suburban living, and so it takes on an air of portentous significance in its placement at the beginning of the novel.

It hints most notably at the fundamental failures of the characters of April Wheeler and Shep Campbell, who are apparently lacking a fundamental sense of self to the point that they are unable to tap into their own emotions in order to re-enact them within the context of performing a play. So while it appears that *The Petrified Forest* is chosen by the Players in order to satiate or articulate some desire to escape, they are still ultimately unable to express those emotions or even vicariously fulfill that desire. The crisis of individual identity that manifests itself in the failure of the performance of *The Petrified Forest* points to a larger crisis of identity that exists within the suburban landscape. In other words, those who live within the constructed, man-made communities are so caught up in performance and conformity that they fail to recognize or enact any semblance of self in a rational or even creative manner, so that when they finally do acknowledge their own desires or fears, they are only able to do so in an explosive and destructive way.

Yates' depiction of the embarrassing failure of the performance of the play is also especially interesting because it seems to signify a strange layering of the performances of the members of the theater group. That is to say that none of the group's members are actually actors and actresses, except for April who attended drama school, so they are very awkwardly pretending to know how to do something that they actually cannot do. Their complete and total failure seems to hint at the impossibility of successful performance: they are unable to successfully act in a play; therefore they are particularly inept at pretending to pretend: "The trouble was that from the very beginning they had been afraid they would end by making fools of themselves, and they had compounded that fear by being afraid to admit it" (4). These lines operate as a very clear representation of how Yates' third-person narration is used to attempt to highlight and

break through the performative and conformist natures of the characters within the novel. We see that the Laurel Players are not only afraid to embarrass themselves, but also that they are afraid to admit their fear to the others, even though if they did they would find that everyone felt the same way. This hidden, suppressed emotion is emblematic of the culture of conformity and isolation in which they live—no one has anyone with whom to communicate difficulties because no one will admit difficulty. The result is paralyzing fear and misperception—the feeling that one is completely alone—no one else can understand their fears or anxieties because no one else suffers them. Therefore, the failure of the performance is devastating to both the actors and the audience, as depicted in a scene that takes place after intermission:

> None of [the audience] wanted to go through with the second and final act, but they all did. And so did the Players, whose one thought now, as plain as the sweat on their faces, was to put the sorry business behind them…it seemed to go on for hours, a cruel and protracted endurance test in which April Wheeler's performance was as bad as the others, if not worse…When the curtain fell at last it was an act of mercy (6).

Neither the audience nor the actors are able to take the disastrous performance in stride, as they cannot truly express their emotions to each other. Each person suffers in isolation, even amidst a crowd of members of the community. They are all experiencing the same fallout, yet they are unable to look to each other, if only to laugh about it. Instead they long to escape the painful evidence of their collective failure: "There was nothing to watch now but the massed faces of the audience as they pressed up the aisles…Anxious, round-eyed, two by two, they looked and moved as if calm and orderly

escape from this place had become the one great necessity of their lives" (7). The sheer terror that the audience displays as a result of the play's failure illustrates the fear and anxiety of the discovery and/or acknowledgement that the performances that they are actually engaged in—the performed ideal of suburban American life—could also be so easily exposed to the world.

In addition to highlighting conformity, containment, and performance, Yates also offers us a vision of a world that has become enveloped by consumption and meaninglessness. It becomes clear to the reader that the idea of a community theater group was a way for the inhabitants of western Connecticut to attempt to inject culture into their lives, though they have failed miserably at it: "All winter, gathering in one another's living rooms for excited talks about Ibsen and Shaw and O'Neill, and then for a show of hands in which a common-sense majority chose *The Petrified Forest*" (4). The theater group becomes something to grasp onto, something that allows them to feel that they are creating meaning, rather than dully moving through one day to another. The idea that the production of the play is actually something bigger, something meaningful, is reflected in the director's advice to the Players: "'Remember this. We're not just putting on a play here. We're establishing a community theater, and that's a pretty important thing to be doing'" (5). The play and the theater become a means to create a shared experience, so the failure of the play is a failure of the community, a failure of the Players' ability to improve their own communal experiences.

In the context of the failure of community, the play's title, *The Petrified Forest,* takes on additional significance in that it seems to be reflective of the isolated, inorganic nature of the suburban landscape. Petrified wood is organic material that has gradually

been eroded and replaced by inorganic stone. The planned communities of the suburbs are also inorganic—houses and spaces that have been constructed for the purpose of fostering a sense of community even as they exist as exclusionary and isolationist spaces. The newly constructed homes placed in pre-determined spaces outside of the more organically developed cities represent something unnatural, something that creates the opposite of what it was intended to create, just as a petrified forest is an example of the natural transforming into the unnatural. The petrified tree appears on the surface to be a living tree; however, the inner, vital aspects of the tree have been transformed into stone. The suburban community that exists within Yates' text appears to be a functioning community, and the Wheelers appear to be a functioning family, but the innermost vital aspects of the community and family are actually in stark opposition to what they appear to be. The constructed nature of the suburbs along with the pressure to conform and consume render the suburban lifestyle an empty one. It appears as though a contented life is available, but beneath the surface there is no meaning; there is only stone.

The meaningless consumption that the residents of western Connecticut engage in, as well the ways in which their living spaces, which become pieces of their identities, are manufactured, artificial, and out-of-place is almost immediately evident within the first few chapters of *Revolutionary Road*:

> The Players, coming out of their various kitchen doors…would see a landscape in which only a few, very old, weathered houses seemed to belong; it made their own homes look as weightless and impermanent, as foolishly misplaced as a great many bright new toys that had been left outdoors overnight and rained on. Their automobiles didn't look right

> either—unnecessarily wide and gleaming in the colors of candy and ice cream, seeming to wince at each splatter of mud, they crawled apologetically…down Route Twelve. (8)

So here we see that the homes and cars that the "Players" inhabit occupy a strange and foreign landscape in which they appear to be oddities. Yates compares the houses to "foolishly misplaced toys," words that convey not just the sense that they do not belong in the space, but also that they carry as much depth and importance as a child's playthings. Yates goes a step further when he says that they were "left outdoors overnight and rained on," lines that emphasize both the carelessness and the impermanence of the homes as cultural relics—a statement that is further reiterated by the comparison to the "old, weathered houses" that do belong within the landscape. Perhaps the most notable idea in these lines is not simply the idea that the homes are out of place because they are new, but the idea that they will somehow never age in a dignified manner the way that the older houses have, that they will somehow be ruined by those who live inside of them.

In addition to the isolation reinforced by the containment of the domestic spaces of the suburbs, the rampant consumerism that was pervading suburban culture is examined in Yates' representations of the automobiles, and eventually the highways, which of course came to extreme cultural prominence during the postwar time period, and which played a crucial role in enabling the creation of the suburbs, as they allowed workers the freedom to move away from where they worked. Yates depicts the automobiles as colored like candy and ice cream, which operates not only as yet another connection between material objects and child-like desires, but also seems to indicate a

desperate need to consume, and to consume items that are not necessarily substantive or meaningful. Candy and ice cream are sugar-laden, unnecessary desserts, with little to no nutritional value, just as the cars exist to appease a desire to appear successful or important, but are not necessarily there to satisfy an actual human need. While Yates describes the cars as just as misplaced as the houses within the confines of the neighborhood, he describes them as "able to relax" as they finally reach the highway, "a long bright valley of colored plastic and plate glass and stainless steel—KING KONE, MOBILGAS, SHOPORAMA, EAT..." (7). The cars, as icons of an obsession with consumption and conformity, are at home in a landscape that provides an opportunity for even more consumption. Each sign that Yates mentions demands some form of consumption, ice cream, gas, shopping, leading to the last sign that operates as almost a direct order—EAT. The fact that Yates begins his description of this vapid suburban landscape by describing its inhabitants as "The Players" hints at the overarching idea that there is a crisis of identity at the heart of the strange society, a crisis that is such that the individuals existing within it are, in actuality, not individuals, but rather performers—men and women attempting to fulfill a role that has been created by someone else.

Fredric Jameson describes the way in which architecture and space emerged in postwar America as engulfed by the time period's obsession with consumption and commodification:

> The immediate postwar heritage of this virtually natural…species protection has been the diversion of such aesthetic instincts…into instant commodification—fast foods…and, on the other hand, the kitsch interior decoration and furniture…which has been explained as a kind of security

> blanket—chintz of the first postwar domestic production—designed to ward off memories of the depression and its stark physical deprivations. (*Postmodernism* 97)

So the newly constructed homes and planned communities of the postwar are not inauthentic simply because they are new, but also because they are consciously attempting to write over a harsher past. In this sense, the comparison to carelessly discarded toys takes on another layer of meaning—they are the product of a sort of child's rebellion—a response to a prior generation that could not afford to take such luxuries for granted. This willingness to discard the past, as well as the present, is described by Adorno and Horkheimer as one of the defining characteristics of "The Culture Industry:" "Even now the older houses just outside the concrete city centers look like slums, and the new bungalows on the outskirts are at one with the flimsy structures…in their praise of technical progress and their built in demand to be discarded after a short while like empty food cans" (1224). So Yates is offering us a creative vision that mirrors these ideas—that a quest to become a society that is so obsessed with the 'new' that it loses its grip on its identity begins to emerge during the postwar period. The obsession with the new that characterizes the movement toward consumerism during the late 50s and early 60s imbues the title *Revolutionary Road* with a somewhat ironic twist. In other words, the 'revolution' of the title does not signal a rebellion or shift in power among the public, but rather a move toward a culture that is seduced by the 'new' in terms of mass marketing and consumption. "Revolutionary" is the new, exciting, easier way of life; it is revolutionary new housing developments, revolutionary new cars, and revolutionary new household products. It is the mass seduction of the citizens propagated

by the culture industry. Additionally, if we return briefly to April's failure to recognize her image reflected in the production of the play, as well as the idea that she is ultimately only able to consume the image, rather than produce it, we can also read "revolutionary" with regard to a cyclical pattern from which consumers are incapable of escape.

The role of the actual physical space and architecture of the suburban landscape in America is also crucial to developing an understanding of the fear, the desire to conform, and the emphasis on performativity that were occurring at the time that *Revolutionary Road* was written. Additionally, they produce containment and insularity that result in being "trapped." The tension and anxiety that the Wheelers develop as a result of their move to the suburbs, their participation in a lifestyle that they initially reject, are crucial to the development of the plot of the novel. Indeed, what are the suburbs if not representations of a forced, conformist societal creation? They were, in reality, planned communities—they did not organically develop in areas where communities lived and worked, but instead were created as an alternate, more ideal space, a protected space, a space where the realities of the harsh world could be kept at bay.

The anxiety regarding the strict conformity a move to the suburbs necessitated is demonstrated by the Wheelers during their first visit to Revolutionary Road to look at houses. The resistance to the social structure of suburban life is evident in their hesitance when looking at properties, and is especially evident in their reactions to the physical structure and environment of the newly constructed homes in the area. The description of their first trip to see what would become their home on Revolutionary Road comes immediately after the explosively angry and violent fight that Frank and April have on their way home from the performance of *The Petrified Forest*, a fight in which they shout

devastatingly harsh insults at each other—calling each other "sick," "disgusting--" to the point that Frank erupts in violence, almost hitting April, but instead banging his fist repeatedly into the side of his car.

The fact that this incident immediately precedes the shopping for and purchasing of their suburban home is extraordinarily significant in that it illuminates the idea that their home in the Connecticut suburbs is actually the source of all of their animosity toward each other, an idea that is reinforced by April saying that Frank has her "safely in a trap," a trap that for April means her role as suburban wife and mother. Frank's incredulous reply to her is to say "*You* in a trap! *You* in a trap! Jesus, don't make me laugh" (Yates 24), lines which indicate that Frank feels just as trapped by his life and marriage as April does by hers. The word "trap" used here takes on a special significance in that it reveals the contradiction inherent in a suburban existence that values containment and isolation. By emphasizing the importance of sealing the suburbs against all external forces of disruption, a "sealing in" is also created so that the obsessive insularity leads to isolation, and hence a feeling of being trapped.

By placing the couple's devastatingly explosive fight immediately before the scene in which they move to the suburbs from the city, Yates seems to emphasize the idea that the suburbs are most precisely the trap from which April and Frank cannot escape. Additionally, the placement of the initial move to the suburbs within the narrative structure of the novel serves to highlight the contrast between image and reality, surface and depth. The disturbing nature of the fight scene is meant to illustrate the ugly reality behind Frank and April's relationship, but immediately following it we get another image of performance—Frank and April as the happy couple seeking domestic harmony

through participation in the American dream. Still, as they view the physical space and architecture of the suburbs, we sense their reluctance. The conformity, artificiality, and simply too-perfect structures of the houses in the development are reflective of everything that worries the couple about their move—that a move to the suburbs is in fact a loss of identity. Therefore Frank and April immediately seek to somehow set themselves apart from the rest of the community: "Mrs. Givings understood…they wanted something out of the ordinary—a small remodeled barn or carriage house…something with a little charm—and she did hate having to tell them that those things simply weren't available any more" (27). Here, we sense the idea that the domestic space is an extension of identity. If the Wheelers are able to resist the conventional planned community structure, they will in turn have the ability to resist the ideology as well. Mrs. Givings, who senses their resistance, plays into their emotions by critiquing large suburban developments: "And then eventually…it leads on up…to a perfectly dreadful new development called Revolutionary Hill Estates—great hulking split levels, all in the most nauseous pastels…No, but the place I want to show you has absolutely no connection with that" (28). Mrs. Givings senses Frank and April's reluctance, and plays on their derision toward the suburbs in order to persuade them to buy the house on Revolutionary Road, a house whose neatness seduces them despite their 'misgivings' about the move: "'Yes, I think it's sort of nice, don't you darling? Of course it does have the picture window...Still I don't suppose one picture window is necessarily going to destroy our personalities'" (28). The picture window here obviously operates as a symbol of the conventional suburban house, but it is also representative of the strict conformity and performativity that the Wheelers will now have to endure. They are no

longer just one of the anonymous masses living out their lives in the city. They are highly visible members of a suburban ‘community’ who will be expected to conform to the ideals and conventions of family life during the era. In other words, the picture window reiterates the culture of performance in which the Wheelers are about to become participants. It mimics a theatrical “fourth wall,” and is symbolic of the audience that will monitor Frank and April’s performance as members of the suburban space. Indeed, it is also worth mentioning here, that in the 2009 film version of the novel, the picture window is used as a powerful symbol during the dramatic climax of the film, as April Wheeler stares out of her large picturesque window while beginning to bleed to death after her self-induced miscarriage. While the picture window is not explicitly mentioned during the final scenes of the novel, the fact that it was included so significantly in that portion of the film version seems to highlight April’s violent rejection of the social structures that ‘trapped’ her and eventually ended her life.

Later, we see that even Mrs. Givings is troubled by the steady progression of the neighborhood towards a lifestyle that values only what is ‘new’ and what she sees as empty and artificial. For her, her home is different—it is real because it is older—it is not a product of a planned, constructed community for city dwellers looking for a place to raise children. For her, it is a place with real value:

> It was one of the few authentic pre-Revolutionary dwellings left in the district, flanked by two of the few remaining wine glass elms, and she liked to think of it as a final bastion against vulgarity…she might have to stand smiling in the kitchens of horrid little ranch houses and split levels, dealing with impossibly rude people whose children…spilled Kool-Aid on

> her dress; she might have to breathe exhaust fumes and absorb the desolation of Route Twelve, with its supermarkets and pizza joints and frozen custard stands, but these only heightened the joy of her returning. (51)

Here again we see Yates allowing us to see past the performance and into the reality of a character through omniscient narration. We are allowed to see that Mrs. Givings finds the new suburban existence “vulgar,” “horrid,” and desolate. She seems to be seeking something authentic, something real. Here again the use of the word ‘revolutionary’ takes on more than one meaning, as her older house, a ‘bastion’ amidst the growth of her suburban neighborhood, has escaped the ‘revolutionary’ new ways of life that are proclaimed as convenient, futuristic, and amazing by the producers of mass culture.

As the Wheelers begin to compromise their own value system, or at least their own vision of what that system should be, in order to convince themselves that their move to the suburbs is for the best, they also begin to see the appeal of the brand new, perfectly constructed, spotlessly clean house as opposed to the older, grimier city apartments to which they are accustomed:

> The place did have possibilities…a sparse, skillful arrangement of furniture would counteract the prim suburban look of this too-symmetrical living room. On the other hand, the very symmetry of the place was undeniably appealing—the fact that all its corners made right angles, that each of its floorboards lay straight and true, that its doors hung in perfect balance and closed without scraping…they could see their children running barefoot down this hallway free of mildew and splinters and

> cockroaches and grit. It did have possibilities. The gathering disorder of their lives might still be sorted out and made to fit these rooms…What could be frightened in as wide and bright, as clean and quiet a house as this? (29)

In this section of Yates' text, the duality of suburban life is exceedingly clear. In fact, it is apparent in the Wheeler's very thought process while examining the house, and we see it through phrases such as "on the other hand" and "the place did have possibilities." We also see the tension between the old and the new, the natural and the artificial, and the appeal of a space that has been cleansed of impurities, which exists as an alternate, deliberately constructed space—a space that was consciously created as a response to the fears intrinsic to urban dwelling. The Wheelers object to the nature of the suburbs, yet they admit that the appeal of a safe, insulated space is undeniable. The house is free of mildew, splinters, cockroaches, and grit—it is immune to external elements. Yates' emphasis on the inconveniences mentioned here reinforces the fear of the external that the suburbs thrive upon. Mildew, splinters, cockroaches, and grit are all representative of the feared and unwanted outside world intruding upon domestic space. The suburbs, in contrast, represent the insular, sterilized space where the elements are safely forced outward. They are able to keep the external at bay, to isolate and insulate in order to form a supposedly sheltered, protected environment. Thus, they mistakenly believe that the ordered and predictable space reflected in the construction of the suburbs will also be able to contain and eradicate the "gathering disorder" of their own messy lives.

The exclusionary practices that typified suburban life are also exemplified within the novel by its presentation of John Givings, the mentally-ill son of the real-estate agent

Mrs. Givings, who Frank and April temporarily befriend at Mrs. Givings' request. John is the subject of neighborhood gossip and whispers—the glaring example of abnormality has been pushed out of the community into a mental institution. Mrs. Givings' attempts to introduce him to the Wheelers illustrate her need to silence the rumors, to bring John back into the suburban fold, to restore a sense of normalcy to her family's reputation. His status as an outsider is solidified in Mrs. Givings' description of his circumstances: "What with overwork...he'd had what amounted to a complete nervous breakdown...Fortunately he was back in this vicinity for a time...but all the same it was worrying to his father and to her. His doctors had thought it wise for him to have a complete rest, so just for the present he was---'well, actually, just for the present he's at Greenacres'" (53). The break here between the textual narration and actual dialogue is indicative of the hesitation and fear that Mrs. Givings feels by admitting that her son does not conform to the standards of suburbia. His excluded status is emphasized by his living arrangement, thus reinscribing the notion that the domestic space is an outward symbol of one's compliance with social structures and norms. John Givings exists outside the insulated suburban space, therefore he is questionable. The tension, fear, and hesitation that Mrs. Givings feels does not stem only from John Givings' past, but also from the admission that she does not conform to the image of the ideal.

The value that Mrs. Givings places on images is further represented by her fantasy of John's meeting with the Wheelers:

> This would be no ordinary visit to the Wheelers'…April Wheeler was there, seated in a white wrought iron chair and turning her pretty head to smile with affection at some wise and fatherly remark by Howard

> Givings...Frank Wheeler was engaged in one of his earnest conversations with John, who was reclining in dignified convalescence on a white wrought–iron chaise lounge...she could see him turn his head to look up at her and say 'Mother? Won't you join us?' The picture kept recurring for days until it was as real as a magazine illustration, and she kept improving on it. (52)

The most significant phrase here is "as real as a magazine illustration," as it gestures toward the importance of mass-produced images to persuade the men and women who consumed them that the representations had some basis in reality, when, in fact, just the opposite was the case. To believe that something is "as real as a magazine illustration" is to consciously or subconsciously admit that the thing is, in fact, not real at all. The repetition of the color white within the fantasy contributes to its portrayal as a dream—something ethereal, something pure—a space where the ugly realities of the world, such as John Givings' mental illness, are erased or washed away. Mrs. Givings' fantasy is the very essence of the impulse to internalize what has been consumed. Here, images of John's disease become harmless. He is not wrestling with his demons on a psychiatrist's couch, he is engaging in "dignified convalescence" on a chaise lounge. In her mind, all of the uncontrollable outside forces are powerless. She is able to create a perfect environment where her son is accepted as part of the community, engaging in pleasantries while the Wheelers' children "could be playing quietly in the shadows…dressed in white shorts and tennis shoes, catching fireflies in Mason jars" (53).

The suburban emphasis on consumption and performance as fundamental aspects of what life should look like is more than just a natural cultural occurrence; it is, in fact, a

nationally imposed value system that is consciously constructed in the national imagination as a response to the communist threat. The postwar time period was characterized by a culture of containment that was marked by containing the communist threat nationally, thus the emphasis on the suburban and domestic provided a contained solution to subversive cultural elements. Author Elaine Tyler-May addresses the movement toward the domestic sphere as an answer to communism in her book *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era:* "The cosmopolitan urban culture represented a decline in the self-reliant entrepreneurial spirit, posing a threat to the national security that was perceived as akin to the threat of communism itself…The domestic ideology emerged as a buffer against those disturbing tendencies" (10).

The "domestic ideology" did not only consist of the impulse to move to a nuclear family model, but also to move out of the city, into the security of the suburbs, and perhaps most importantly, to foster the image of idyllic domestic security by purchasing domestic accessories in the forms of homes, cars, and appliances. Therefore, a lifestyle that embraces the consumption of material goods and participates in demonstrations of material wealth becomes the essence of the American capitalist ideal that Jameson and Adorno and Horkheimer are criticizing. Tyler-May also addresses the concept of suburban life and consumer culture as examples of the superiority of American capitalism within postwar containment culture. In the chapter of her book entitled "The Commodity Gap: Consumerism and the Modern Home," Tyler-May explains that American politicians pointed to the seeming success of the suburbs and the American family as indicative of a successful society overall:

> But for Nixon, home ownership represented more than a comfortable way of life; it was the validation of the free enterprise system. Nixon's frame of reference was the family: 'There are 44 million families in the United States…Thirty-one million families own their own homes and the land on which they were built. America's 44 million families own a total of 56 million cars, 50 million television sets, and 143 million radio sets.' (155)

So we see that home ownership and the steady amassing of material goods and possessions become symbolic of the essence of America—an ideal that means one is truly a participant in the American way of life. Still, the ideal is an illusion. For one, it ignores the population that did not live in the suburbs, but lived in the less-than-ideal vision of the city, a population that included minorities and the poor. In addition, it places an extraordinary amount of pressure on the families who did live in the suburbs, so that the suburban existence in actuality becomes a symbol not of an ideal life, but instead the epitome of a simulation, in essence, a lie. The picturesque suburban landscape becomes a frightening example of a superficial layer of perfection that actually hides a creeping, disturbing reality behind its walls. In a sense, this duality that exists in the suburbs becomes a symbol of the contradictions intrinsic to American society overall—a society in which the whitewashed, idyllic suburban spaces exist as a way to hide, or avoid, the harsh realities of poverty, inequality, and oppression that existed in spaces such as the large cities or the American South. Stephanie Coontz also addresses the intersections between consumption in the suburbs and the invisibility of racial and ethnic difference:

> The message was clear: Buy these ranch houses, Hotpoint appliances, and child-raising ideals; relate to your spouse like this; get a new car to wash with your kids on Sunday afternoons; organize your dinners like that—and you too can escape from the conflicts of race, class, and political witch-hunts into harmonious families where father knows best, mother is never bored or irritated, and teenagers rush to the dinner table each night, eager to get their latest dose of parental wisdom. (*The Way We Really Are* 48)

Here we see that the suburbs did not only reflect the fear of the “other,” but that they also became examples of an extreme national obsession with domesticity in response to the fears of nuclear war presented by the Cold War with Russia. The resulting persistent paranoia was present throughout the nation, including within the government, which advised the American public to monitor their neighbors and to report any odd behavior that could be attributed to ties to communism. The suburban space appears to exist as a place where an imaginary idyllic world appears to be reality, yet the people who exist within it, exemplified here by the Wheelers, are unable to successfully reconcile the fundamental dishonesty that seems to be embedded within suburban life.

If we move from the historical perspective of Coontz and Tyler-May back into the theoretical perspective on the postmodern put forth by Jameson, we see that for Jameson, the move into the suburbs and the increasing emphasis on consumer goods and media culture are, in fact, the essence of postmodernism. Jameson theorizes that the postmodern movement is decidedly entangled with the evolution of our society into “what is often euphemistically called modernization, postindustrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, or multinational capitalism” (“Postmodernism

and Consumer Society" 1962). Jameson goes on to claim that the descent of high modernism into postmodernism is built upon not just a shift in the meaning or importance of culture, but upon an actual loss of meaning—a movement into a time where culture, art, etc., lose their ability to be subversive because they are quickly devoured by the masses. For Jameson, this is the result of our capitalist system: "This new moment of capitalism can be dated from the postwar boom in the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s…The 1960s are in many ways the key transitional period, a period in which the new international order...is at one and the same time set in place and is swept and shaken by its own internal contradictions and by external resistance" (1962). So we see that the postwar period was crucial to the creation of a completely different way of life, especially in the middle class suburbs. In this new existence, as Jameson sees it, all aspects of daily life become completely enmeshed within a capitalist system, so that art, literature, television, family relationships, all become swallowed up by "mass or popular culture," where "the line between high art and commercial forms seems increasingly difficult to draw" (1961). Therefore, if life becomes a sort of cyclical or "revolutionary" creation both of and by mass and popular culture, it also engenders a crisis of identity and meaninglessness—a world in which nothing can exist to subvert societal structures, because they cannot escape being swallowed by the same structures that they are attempting to subvert.

Indeed the subject of suburbia as a critical space in defining postwar America is one that has been examined in literature, film, television, and literary criticism. In his 2012 article "Contested Terrain: The Suburbs as Region," author Keith Wilhite explores the role that the suburbs have played in the literary and cultural arenas: "Suburban fiction

updates and revises long-standing regionalist approaches to local and global scales: the charged insularity of the domestic sphere, the geographic containment of racial difference, the repressive construction of a common national identity, and the imperial reach of nation" (619). For Wilhite, suburban literature has taken the place of American regionalist literature in that it "provides a contested terrain for evolving US demographics and shifting ideations of American identity" (619). For the purposes of this project, this emphasis on the suburbs as a key component in the construction of both individual and national identity is crucial to deconstructing the meaning of *Revolutionary Road* as a disruption and subversion to a narrative in the specific temporal space in which the narrative was occurring. In this way, it can be read as an attempt to rupture the façade of the suburbs from within. In other words, it is an attempt to locate the truth within the performance. *Revolutionary Road* therefore offers to expose the strict constructedness and falsity, reinforced and perpetuated by media and the government, of the suburb as the center of American life.

For the Wheelers the only way to address the isolation and dissatisfaction they feel with their lives is to escape. For them, the domestic space has become so overwrought with tension and anxiety that they must seek alternative spaces in order to save themselves. Still, however, their fantasies of escape to Europe are ultimately no more than a failed attempt at dealing with their situation. For the reader, the idea of Europe is obviously doomed from the beginning, and hence we are left to turn each page with a growing sensation of trepidation and pity as we cringe at the alarming self-deception taking place between them. For the Wheelers, the only way of escaping the

isolation of the suburban environment is by leaving it, as we see here in April's drastic speech about the dangers of their lives:

> Because you see I happen to think *this* is unrealistic. I think it's unrealistic for a man with a fine mind to go on working...at a job he can't stand, coming home to a house he can't stand in a place he can't stand either, to a wife who's equally unable to stand the same things, living among a bunch of frightened little—my God, Frank, I don't have to tell you what's wrong with this environment…remember what you said about the whole idea of suburbia being to keep reality at bay? (Yates 48)

So, we see the idea of Europe, which first came into play during April's performance as Gabby, is positioned here as a space in which Frank and April will be able to escape not only the daily tedium of their jobs and lives, but also as a place in which they will be able to stop pretending. Frank and April believe that suburbia is meant to keep reality at bay and, thus, they want to move into an environment where the sense of containment and isolationism is absent. To them, Paris stands as the answer to not just their marital problems, but indeed to all of their problems. In Paris, they will be not have to participate (or so they think) in mundane cocktail hours, comply with strict social roles, produce awful renditions of depressing plays, or drive on desolate highways ordering them to consume. It is a panacea for the ills that have plagued them since they resigned themselves to suburban life. Of course, the dream of Europe as a means of escape merely becomes another lie to anticipate—a lie that allows them to continue to ignore any of the actual issues that are plaguing them. Here, Yates' critique of 1950s life runs deeper than that of the culture surrounding the suburban landscape. It also points back to a

fundamental lack of self-awareness that allowed people to live out isolated lives plagued with anxiety and resentment.

Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* offers a unique perspective on the myth of the perfect suburban American family in that it is created during the period that it is criticizing. Therefore, it can be read as an attempt at puncturing the mythologies that pervade the era, or pulling back the curtain on the anxieties that actually simmered just behind the picket fences and freshly painted doors. *Revolutionary Road* highlights the performativity and conformity that disguised the utter discomfort and anxiety of suburban life during the middle of the twentieth century. If Coontz and Tyler-May offer us a historical redefinition of life during that era, Yates offers us a disturbing vision of just how damaging the denial of the realities of life could be. In other words, Yates' novel offers us a jarring, emotional, creative glimpse into the truths that Coontz is attempting to tell her contemporary audience.

Here, the question of the power of nostalgia again becomes intriguingly obvious. If Yates, among others, was able to tear through the façade of idyllic suburbia through his relentless portrayals of Frank and April Wheeler in 1961, why was it necessary for historical scholars such as Stephanie Coontz and Elaine Tyler-May to attempt to deconstruct the suburban ideal so many years later? What is it that is so powerful about the vision of the perfect suburban American family that it continues to dominate our cultural imagination? My intention in the next chapter is to provide a thorough analysis of the thematic elements of Yates' text so that the analysis may be used to respond to my larger questions regarding nostalgia, consumer culture, and our need to romanticize the past. If we are able to momentarily pull back the curtain to reveal truths about our past

that may not fall in line with our nostalgia about it, then why does it seem that we are unable to maintain that truth? The next chapter of this project therefore seeks to examine the contradictions that remain in the national consciousness with regard to the postwar era, contradictions that are both magnified and interrogated through the television series *Mad Men.*

THE REVOLUTION WILL BE ADVERTISED: *MAD MEN* AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF A CULTURE

Yates' *Revolutionary Road* depicts the internal conflicts and crises created by an artificially inscribed code of family, community, and domesticity in 1950s America, a code that was produced, re-created, and reinforced through national narratives that played out through the widespread consumption of television sitcoms and the advertisements that supported them. As we have previously examined, the relationship between mass consumerism and the nationalistic narratives of the Cold War-era United States was extremely intertwined. As television sets moved rapidly into the center of suburban existence, they also became the center of gravity drawing suburban American families together. In other words, the television acted as a means to create an artificially centralized family structure in that it acted as a sort of common ground upon which the family could enjoy a shared experience. Besides simply operating as a force to pull the family together, it also became the author of the idea of the "ideal family," an ideal that was constantly reinforced through the television shows and advertisements that the average American family consumed daily. Stephanie Coontz details the effects of television and advertising on the average suburban American family in her book chapter "What We Really Miss about the Fifties":

> At the time, everyone knew that shows such as Donna Reed, Ozzie and Harriet, Leave It To Beaver, and Father Knows Best were not the way families really were…They watched them to see how families were *supposed* to live…The sitcoms were simultaneously advertisements, etiquette manuals, and how to lessons for a new way of organizing marriage and child raising. (*The Way We Really Are* 63)

We see here that the television, along with the advertisements that promoted consumption as validation of the American ideal, becomes more than a form of entertainment. It becomes a guidebook for the "proper" way to live the American life. So we can see that the culture of performance and conformity that plagued the suburban neighborhoods such as Revolutionary Road can be traced back to the cultural productions that promoted a specific family and social order. *Mad Men*, therefore, can be read as an attempt to re-visit the past in order to disrupt and re-direct the narrative created by the advertising of the era by projecting the narrative structure back onto its originators.

Mad Men, therefore, is particularly compelling because it seeks to portray an American era in which consumption and dissemination of images were reaching new heights by focusing its gaze on the men who manufactured the images and created the desire to consume. Therefore, where *Revolutionary Road* portrays the failure of the narrative of the suburban ideology, *Mad Men* allows us to witness the creation of the ideology—the ways in which marketing and consumption develop a stronghold on the American consciousness by disseminating the idea that to consume is to be a good American, to conform to strict social roles is to conquer the threats to our American way of life, and to create an ideal family space is the epitome of the American dream. Where

Revolutionary Road depicts the failure of the so-called American Dream, *Mad Men* unveils the myth behind the dream; it represents the ways in which the culture industry capitalizes on the failures of the families who consume by allowing them to think that if they simply consume more, they may be able to overcome their anxieties, their unhappiness, their overall dissatisfaction with the tedium of everyday life.

So, as Jameson noted, the substantial shift that occurred in postwar society was characterized by a shift into a new "media society." The break that, for Jameson, signifies the beginning of the postmodern era therefore partially hinges upon the marked difference in the ways that society began to consume media. For Jameson, what becomes known as the postmodern is characterized by "New types of consumption; planned obsolescence; an ever more rapid rhythm of fashion and styling changes; the penetration of advertising, television and the media generally to a hitherto unparalleled degree throughout society" ("Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 1974). Therefore the subject matter of *Mad Men* is of particular interest in that it attempts to re-visit the early 1960s with a self-conscious focus toward the orchestrators of the myths that were pervading society at the time. To express it plainly: If the Wheelers are victims, the admen of Sterling Cooper (and eventually Draper Pryce) are the perpetrators. The trouble here lies in the fact that while the admen are the agents of the culture industry, complete with matching suits and hats, they, and their families, are also existing within the hegemonic social structures that their work reinforces. Thus, the characters on the series operate in a sort of dual existence of producers and consumers, much like the series itself does.

Because *Mad Men* depicts the late 1950s and early 1960s advertising world as the primary content of the show, it also occupies a convergent space between the worlds of cultural producers and consumers. Indeed, *Mad Men* cannot escape from the paradoxical nature of its subject. By illustrating the morally ambiguous nature of the advertising world, the television show is also replicating it, by engaging in embedded forms of advertising as well as more overt ones. For example, one of Sterling Cooper's potential "fictional" clients, American Airlines, has a new, "real" ad campaign in which Jon Hamm, the actor who plays Don Draper, provides the voiceover. For viewers of *Mad Men*, the effect is unmistakable: we are not merely listening to a celebrity voiced ad campaign; we are clients, listening to a presentation by the amazingly talented Don Draper of Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce. *Mad Men* does not simply exist as a critical or artistic representation of the advertising business; *Mad Men* is indeed *in the business*. If we take *Mad Men's* very real role in the capitalist system into consideration, Adorno and Horkheimer's idea of the deception or concealment of the true motives of the culture industry seems particularly relevant:

> The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry. The old experience of the movie-goer, who sees the world outside as an extension of the film he has just left (because the latter is intent upon reproducing the world of everyday perceptions), is now the producer's guideline. The more intensely and flawlessly his techniques duplicate empirical objects, the easier it is today for the illusion to prevail that the outside world is the straightforward continuation of that presented on the screen. (65)

Therefore, the flawless, or at least near flawless, technical skill with which *Mad Men* portrays the ad world, as well as the past itself, also creates tension due to its complicit participation in the culture industry that it purports to critique. Hence, when Jon Hamm the actor accepts a job as the voiceover in an American Airlines ad, the outside world does indeed become a continuation of what has been presented on screen as art. American Airlines is not the only company to use *Mad Men* as inspiration for their ad campaigns. Companies such as Banana Republic, BMW, Lincoln Motor Company, and even Clorox have capitalized on the success of *Mad Men* with contemporary ad campaigns inspired by the series. The layering of the critiques of the American consumer industry on top of the participation in it blurs the lines between art and capitalism, an almost perfect embodiment of Adorno and Horkheimer's, as well as Jameson's, criticisms of the culture industry. Indeed, as Jameson puts it "Today the products are…diffused throughout the space and time of the entertainment…segments as part of the content, so that…it is sometimes not clear when the narrative segment has ended and the commercial has begun (since the same actors appear in the commercial segment as well)" (*Postmodernism* 275). The result, for *Mad Men*, is that the show becomes the embodiment of a fundamental split in the American psyche. The advertising presentations on the show attempt to portray the inner workings of the advertising world, and also show us that the men behind the ads are callous, damaged, deeply flawed individuals who view every experience as potential fodder for the next great advertisement. It would seem that this vision offers a clear, uncomplicated critique of consumerism. Yet, at the same time, the show is enacting the very idea it is attempting to resist. In other words, the vision of the past in *Mad Men* is one that illuminates the crisis

of identity that was imminent in an America that was careening toward an existence of hopeless consumption. In this way the show also mirrors Jameson's idea that art is now inseparable from advertising and commodity production: "For one thing commodity production and in particular our clothing, furniture, buildings, and other artifacts are now intimately tied with styling changes which derive from artistic experimentation; our advertising...is fed by postmodernism in all the arts and inconceivable without it" ("Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 1973). So here, the reflexivity of *Mad Men* is again exposed as it operates at once as artistic expression, advertisement, critic of consumer culture, and nostalgic inspiration for clothing, furniture, and interior design.

Indeed, nostalgia for the postwar time period is perhaps one of the most obvious contradictions engendered by the production of *Mad Men*. On one hand, the series seeks to expose the racism, sexism, and conservatism that pervaded the era; however, on the other, it evokes powerful feelings of nostalgia, even in viewers who did not live during the time period. So while the aesthetics of the series seem to create the desire to return to the time, the content of the series seems to warn against that desire. Still, however, the nostalgic impulse created by the series may cloud the message it is attempting to convey. Therefore, the nostalgia engendered by the series is particularly interesting because it seems to fulfill two seemingly oppositional impulses regarding the time period. One is the impulse to romanticize an idealized vision of the past, while the other is the impulse to expose the cracks and fissures that permeate that ideal.

Determining which impulse the series is ultimately successful in fulfilling has indeed become a richly debatable subject among contemporary academics and critics. In the introduction to the anthology *Mad Men, Mad World: Sex, Politics, Style, and the*

1960's, the debate over the issue of *Mad Men*'s examination of the past as 'glib' or 'smug' is discussed at length: "...the charge of smugness clings to *Mad Men* like the stale odor of cigarettes…Thus, according to Sady Doyle in the *Atlantic*, '*Mad Men* affords viewers an illusion of moral superiority'; and for Benjamin Schwarz...the show 'encourages the condescension of posterity'" (Goodlad, Kaganovsky, and Rushing 5). Therefore, one of the central questions regarding the re-construction of the past in *Mad Men* becomes whether or not it is a productive re-construction in terms of interrogating structures of oppression. Does it merely allow us to feel unjustifiably proud of ourselves for recognizing and rejecting blatant racism, homophobia, and sexism? Or, does it cause us to question these systems so that we might be better able to recognize them in our own contemporary lives? It seems that whatever meaning the producers of the show may be trying to create will ultimately be obscured by the way in which the viewer chooses to perceive and reconstruct it in his or her own mind. Therefore, even the most obvious critique of the oppressive mechanisms of the timeframe may be obscured to a viewer who is more concerned with what dress Betty Draper is wearing in a given episode, an impulse that is explored by fans who actually dress up as the characters and host themed parties (15).

In her article on the fashion of *Mad Men*, "Swing Skirts and Swinging Singles," author Mabel Rosenheck evaluates this cultural re-enactment of the styles and aesthetics of the past as a function of the series' ability to take the sense of nostalgia from a vague "feeling of past-ness" to a sharp and powerful manifestation of cultural memory. For Rosenheck, *Mad Men's* strict attention to historical accuracy in the realms of style and fashion allow it to move beyond a mere representation of the past, and instead into a

shared experience of collective memory: "History fixes the past; memory emphasizes the past as a dynamic, flexible, and usable part of everyday life. Yet these two concepts need not be diametrically opposed...'cultural memory is a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history.' Sturken's alternative. . . lies in presenting 'cultural memory and history as entangled rather than oppositional'" (34). The aesthetic of *Mad Men* therefore becomes crucial to the way in which it is consumed by the viewers in that it immerses them completely within the past. Rosenheck notes that "producer Scott Hornbacher says that 'accuracy to the period is of paramount importance to all of us...because if it's wrong...it compromises the ability for people to suspend their disbelief'" (32). The conscious attempt to reproduce the past with obsessive accuracy perpetuates the construction of images that reflect nostalgia and shared experiences as culturally significant, even as it seems to allow us a sense of distance from the subject matter it immerses us within. Therefore, it offers an intercessory space where we occupy the past aesthetically even as we distance ourselves from it ideologically. The space therefore becomes troubled by these oppositional impulses, as the distance we imagine is not necessarily as significant as we think. For Jameson, this nostalgic impulse indicates our "pathological failure to deal with time and history" ("Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 1974). In other words, our inability to properly reconcile our past manifests itself in these nostalgically reproduced images.

The temporal duality that *Mad Men* invokes differentiates it from *Revolutionary Road* precisely because of its inability to be divorced from our relationship to the past. *Revolutionary Road* was very much a product of the time and space where it originated, and so as we read it today, we assign it the status of a cultural artifact. In other words, it

is firmly located at a specific point in time, and we assign it meaning based on that fact. The distance that we feel when engaging with the text of *Revolutionary Road* is therefore very real; so while we are still inclined to interpret it through a contemporary lens, we can also see its depiction of suburban isolation unfold as a tangible record of the time and space in which it was created. *Mad Men*, on the other hand, operates in such a manner that it is not a record of a specific time, but rather an interpretation of one. It is an actual re-writing of the past, and in that way it is an imposition on the past, an active agent that seeks to deconstruct and re-form it in its own image. Thus, it becomes an extremely complex collection of text and image from which to make meaning in that it is incapable from separating itself from the past that it attempts to critique. In fact, even Don Draper's fractured identity and mysterious past are revealed to the viewer in abrupt, disorienting temporal shifts in the narrative. So the viewer is constantly reminded of Don's failure to properly reconcile his own past, a fact that is reflective of his own "pathological failure to deal with time and history" (Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 1974). In other words, to watch *Mad Men* is to move from the contemporary, into the early 1960s, and then once again (and again) into Don's past, so that the viewers must constantly attempt to re-locate themselves into the appropriate temporal space. Still, this attempt is doomed to fail because we are unable to separate ourselves from our actual space in time. If we add to this the fact that the series is always in progress, in that the characters themselves are constantly changing as they move forward through time in the series itself, we are left with a nearly complete disruption of chronological time; we are displaced. This displacement, coupled with the fact that Don Draper conceals his true past by lying to everyone in his life, reflects and illuminates the

failure to properly deal with time and history, which Jameson claims is an essential characteristic of the postmodern condition.

Indeed, for Jameson, the very medium of television itself functions as a means for the viewer to escape "real time," and delve into an alternate space where temporality can be manipulated:

> We all know, but always forget, that the fictive scenes and conversations on the movie screen radically foreshorten reality as the clock ticks are never…coterminous with the putative length of such moments in real life, or in 'real time:' something a filmmaker can always uncomfortably remind us of by returning occasionally to real time...Is it possible then, that 'fiction' is what is in question here and that it can be defined essentially as the construction of just such fictive and foreshortened temporalities…which are then substituted for a real time we are thereby enabled to forget? (*Postmodernism* 74)

Here we see the connection between *Mad Men*, the past, and nostalgia become exceedingly complex and complicated. If the very definition of fiction is the construction of fictive temporalities that allow us to escape our own 'real' time, then our relationship to a television show such as *Mad Men* becomes fraught with tension between the contemporary and the past. In other words, as we watch, we are experiencing a fictive time that attempts to depict a former actual time, as a means to escape our own current reality. However, this complex relationship seems to result in the false nostalgia that the show appears to deconstruct. Thus, our inherent desire to experience fictive time as an

escape from real time reifies feelings of nostalgia that may cause the viewer to ignore the larger critiques that the show is attempting to make.

The fact that *Mad Men* occupies multiple temporal spaces also makes it reflective of Benjamin's ideas of "mechanical reproduction": "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence" (1168). *Mad Men* is a reproduction of a specific time and space, but it has rewritten that time and space onto the present. Thus, it affords us the opportunity to reexamine flawed methods of thinking and existing, yet it also runs the risk of reproducing the flaws rather than deconstructing them.

The danger of this reproduction is especially evident in episode 12, "The Mountain King," from the second season of the series. The episode features a very unsettling scene where Joan Harris, head secretary at Sterling Cooper, is raped by her husband-to-be. In an online *Atlantic* article entitled "*Mad Men*'s Very Modern Sexism Problem," author Sady Doyle explores the disturbing audience reactions to the show: "Joan Holloway was raped by her fiancé—a crime that almost certainly wouldn't be recognized as such in 1963…What's astounding is that people will say 'You know that episode where Joan sort of got raped?' said Christina Hendricks (the actress who plays Joan) of fan reactions." For Doyle, the idea that this act is so easily misinterpreted is indicative of the fact that misogyny and sexism are very much still alive: "Our inability to identify misogyny, even on a show that presents it so melodramatically, points to the persistence of sexism" (5). In other words, the fact that sexism, racism, and homophobia

persist in our contemporary world can lead us to misinterpret the messages that *Mad Men* is attempting to send. The disconnect that is formed here between the viewer and what occurs within the world of *Mad Men* therefore highlights the risk of the self-conscious re-imagining of the past—the fact that an attempt to illuminate the flaws and problems of the era can indeed perpetuate the problems rather than criticizing them. Nostalgia therefore plays a key role in altering or disfiguring attempts at critique in that it clouds the ability to see it. If we as viewers become fascinated and enraptured with the "way things were" by fetishizing fashion, style, or even behaviors such as drinking while at work, then we may fail to recognize the more serious cultural critiques that the show portrays.

Nostalgia serves multiple, contradictory functions in *Mad Men*—it is an ever present emotion that is used, commodified, and colonized as a method to sell products and please clients, which seems to be one of the primary ways that the producers of the show are attempting to deconstruct it. By highlighting the use of nostalgia to sell products, the show's creators are also illustrating the paradox of advertising and consumerism—by purchasing a product we are attempting to re-create an old emotion by embracing something new. In Irene Small's article "Against Depth: Looking at Surface through the Kodak Carousel," she examines the relationship of Don's Kodak Carousel advertising pitch and his ability to turn surface into depth through creative vision: "I call attention to Don's Kodak Carousel pitch both for its double articulation of nostalgia and because the magical transmutation of material thing into dematerialized image seated literally at the heart of the slide projector encapsulates much of what is at stake in *Mad Men's* imagination of its own relationship to avant-garde art and the culture industry of

the 1960s" (92). Small goes on to explore some of the thematic elements of the relationship of art to advertising during the 1960s. Like Small, I would like to focus here on the idea of the 'articulation of nostalgia' and the way that it operates within the episode. However, I believe that the episode is less concerned with the transformation from material into image and more concerned with the idea that the nostalgic image was never anything but immaterial.

The episode "The Wheel" focuses on the passage of time, the creation and/or denial of memories, and a fundamental inability to confront the past in a way that will help to productively deal with the present. In the beginning of the episode, when Don informs Betty that he will not be attending Thanksgiving at her family's house, her reply regarding their children is "What about them? What about their childhood memories?" ("The Wheel"). Don, unpersuaded, is completely dismissive of her line of reasoning. Later in the episode, as Don ponders the creation of a campaign for Kodak's new, round slide projector, Don watches old movies of his wife and children. He subsequently decides to call his brother Adam, who he rejected months earlier due to the fact that he did not want to address his actual past as Dick Whitman, the identity that he attempted to erase after the Korean War. He discovers that his brother has hung himself. Don's refusal to confront his own past and his brother's resulting death indicate the pathological aspect of nostalgia that Jameson discusses; Don is able to understand and evoke the idea of nostalgia for his clients, while he simultaneously reveals an inability to effectively deal with his own personal time and history.

As Don presents his idea to Kodak, he speaks of two fundamental aspects of advertising. The first is that the most important idea is always "new." It is 'newness'

that creates a desire in the consumer. Additionally, he relates the idea that there is a deeper bond that a person can feel with a product, the feeling of nostalgia, which Don proclaims is “the pain from an old wound, delicate but potent, which goes around and around, always circling back to a place where we are loved” (“The Wheel”). As Don presents the idea of nostalgia, he clicks slowly and deliberately through his own family pictures, creating a touching montage of moments from his life with his own family, who are, in reality, simultaneously boarding a train to spend Thanksgiving without him. In the final scenes of the episode, we see Don arrive home early enough to catch them, inform them that he will come with them after all, and be greeted as a hero in an overtly saccharine display of familial warmth and affection. The viewer is made to believe that this is the actual final scene, and it is convincing somehow, despite the fact that we know the truth—that Betty has actually been obsessing over Don’s infidelity throughout the episode to the point of informing neighborhood children of how extremely “sad” she is. Of course, the scene is ultimately revealed to be a fantasy, just as Don’s carefully displayed slideshow was a fantasy. Don actually comes home to a dark, empty house and slumps down in his staircase as Bob Dylan’s “Don’t Think Twice” begins to play over the scene. So, while this episode seeks to illuminate the inability to properly create and experience memory as a function of identity for the character of Don Draper, it seems to at the same time criticize the emotion nostalgia itself in an attempt to deconstruct the nostalgia brought on by the series. Indeed, even the song at the end of the episode is effective for inducing a melancholic nostalgia in the viewer/listener, even as its lyrics reflect the uselessness of re-visiting the past: “It ain’t no use to sit and wonder why babe/it’ll never do somehow” (Dylan). The fact that the episode is the last one of the first

season of the show is also quite telling, in that it operates as a warning about the false nostalgic ideal, and reveals that allowing oneself to become consumed by that false nostalgia will not lead to fulfillment, but only disillusionment.

Additionally, Don's description of nostalgia as something that goes around and around, circling back upon itself, as the title of the show and the Kodak carousel itself also suggest, highlights the danger of the cyclical nature of nostalgia and the past. If one is condemned to this cyclical motion, constantly caught up in the past, he or she is also rendered incapable of moving forward; he or she is trapped in an inescapable, perpetual motion. This cyclical description also seems to communicate the awareness that it is impossible to escape nostalgia, even while attempting to disrupt and deconstruct it. Indeed, Don has made every effort to forcibly remove himself from his past, yet he is unable to fully do so. We will always be seduced by the possibility of the past, just as we were seduced by the image of Don being greeted by a happy, loving family despite all of the evidence we had seen to contradict this possibility. Lastly, it seems that the idea of the wheel, or "The Carousel" as it comes to be known, reinforces the paradoxical nature of the new consumer society that Jameson analyzes and that *Revolutionary Road* criticizes—the fact that we obsessively look to the new in order to fulfill the void left by the old. We are constantly seeking to fulfill our needs and desires with what is new in order to re-create emotions and experiences based in nostalgia.

Yet another implication of "The Wheel" rests in its relation to the idea of the image as mechanical reproduction, which is decidedly obvious within the slideshow scene, as images of Don's family, images that are indeed extremely separated from the time and space in which they were created (a fact made clear by the smiles on the faces of

the members of the Draper family), are able to be reproduced and manipulated to serve a function that Don seems to recognize as uniquely powerful. The division between the nostalgic aura presented by the slides as opposed to the "aura" that Benjamin discusses as a phenomenon unique to a piece of art that exists within the actual space in which it is created is made clear by a late night conversation between Harry and Don. As they begin to discuss what the benefit of the carousel projector is, Harry describes the appeal of the mechanical photography as well as the persistence of images: "I took pictures...the machinery is definitely part of the fun. It's mechanical. I was always fascinated by the cave paintings...17,000 years old...I thought it was someone reaching through the stone, right to us. I was here" ("The Wheel"). For Harry, the cave paintings functioned as works of art embedded in ritual and having their own unique aura. For Don, however, the 'I was here' quality that Harry mentions is simply another marker of the power of nostalgia, a marker that he can reproduce. So if Benjamin says that to "pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura is the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction" (1171), then Don displays an acute awareness of this possibility. But for Don, the ultimate goal of that extraction is simply to evoke an emotional response that can be manipulated into more consumption. For Don, moving reality into image creates what Jameson calls "the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents" ("Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 1974). Thus, we are never able to truly understand the past, as it is constantly positioned as the present.

Thus, it seems that we are unable to envision the future without fantasizing about and romanticizing the past, and that this romanticization clouds our ability to properly

confront the present. In addition to directly confronting nostalgia, as they did in the episode "The Wheel," the show's creators are also able to deconstruct the power of nostalgia through the purposeful exposure of oppressive ideologies such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism. In this sense, the producers seem to be intent on exposing what Coontz identifies "the nostalgia trap" (*The Way We Never Were*), our tendency to gloss over the harmful realities of our past in order to engage in a romanticized narrative of it. In the romanticized version of the past, and of the American dream, the reality that we can see peeking through the cracks of postmodern novels, theory, and cultural criticism becomes muted and hidden in an American imagination that has been warped by materialism, advertising, and popular culture. In this way, our rendering of the suburban experience in the 1950s and 60s mirrors the landscape of the suburbs themselves. We seem to insist on protecting and isolating ourselves from the actual historical truth of the era. By focusing on happy families, white picket fences, and friendly neighbors, we can wash away the sexism, racism, oppression, alcoholism, and mental illnesses that permeated the era.

Jameson also confronts our need to romanticize what he says is not the 1950s, which is an actual numerical space in time, but "the fifties," a nostalgia-distorted perspective on an era that we insist on looking back on in the wrong way. He acknowledges that the actual "high" art and criticism of the time period attempts to criticize it properly, but that the mass culture that we insist upon returning to is nothing but false images, reflections of something that never actually existed in reality: "This is clearly however, to shift from the realities of the 1950s to the representation of that rather different thing, the 'fifties,' a shift which obligates us in addition to underscore the

cultural sources of all the attributes with which we have endowed the period, many of which...derive from its own television programs...its own representation of itself" (*Postmodernism* 281). Here we see that the idea of the image becomes of utmost importance in terms of nostalgia and cultural memory. It is not reality that persists in the collective imagination; it is the image. *Mad Men* seems to attempt to disrupt this impulse by tearing down the image and reconstructing a new one, but this new image would still cease to exist without the prior one existing first. Still, *Mad Men* at least represents an attempt to disrupt the image—an attempt to exist as what Jameson would classify as one of the many "forms of protest against the fifties…against the...complacency, against the sealed self-content of the small (white, middle-class) town, against the conformist and the family-centered ethnocentrism of a prosperous United States learning to consume…whose immediacy has by now largely lost its edge" (*Postmodernism* 279). So although *Mad Men* operates as a highly complicated piece of media, it still also functions as a collection of images that possibly have the ability to puncture our already highly mediated feelings of nostalgia for a time period where images became ubiquitous and powerful, and where the need to live up to those images was crucial.

If we return to the themes of performance and conformity that pervade *Revolutionary Road*, the *Mad Men* episode entitled "A Night to Remember" is of particular interest. The episode not only exemplifies the highly performative nature of Betty's role as wife of a "company man," but it also offers a glimpse into the highly measured methods of manipulating the American housewife in terms of advertising specific products. "A Night to Remember" therefore epitomizes the reduction of life

events and daily existence to being meaningful only in terms of creating opportunities for suburban consumption.

"A Night to Remember" plays with the deconstruction of performed roles throughout the episode, and it opens with a scene of Betty, appearing competent, resolute, and content as she participates in her weekly horseback ride. Meanwhile, Don and his associates are discussing their plans to market the new, imported beer Heineken to the suburban housewives who do all the purchasing for the house. The dichotomy between the subservient image of the suburban housewife and her actual power is exposed here; a housewife is perceived as a compliant supporter of her husband, but in a consumer society, the person with the most purchasing power is the person who holds the reins. Therefore, for Don, learning how to successfully manipulate his wife is not only a means for him to carry out his marital infidelity, it is also his job. This is perhaps the most significant difference between *Revolutionary Road* and *Mad Men*, in that in the former, the characters' performances are simply carried out day after day, whereas in *Mad Men*, we see the actual orchestration of performance. We see the ways in which advertising executives utilize performance in order to manipulate their clients and the masses, but we also see the ways in which they are able to see through performance because it is they who created the image that the masses are attempting to emulate.

As the episode progresses, the divide between performance and reality becomes drastically emphasized, as Betty organizes a meticulously crafted "around the world" themed dinner party in order to entertain Don's guests from the city. She presents a well-rehearsed description of each course and its corresponding country, concluding her presentation with a nod to an ice bucket filled with the imported Heineken. Don and his

dinner guest Duck Phillips laugh, as Duck cannot believe that Betty was actually unknowingly seduced by Don's marketing campaign, and Betty is visibly disheartened. Here, Betty's expression of disillusionment is not just at being exposed as a gullible housewife regarding the Heineken campaign, but at Don's manipulation of her overall.

After the guests leave, Betty is compelled to finally confront him about the "lie" that he insists on living. Again, the duality of Don and his life as an adman is exposed. The 'lie' is in fact his truth—he is the embodiment of dishonesty; he creates, manipulates, and lives in a world where everything is a piece in his lie. Therefore, when Betty accuses him of living a 'lie,' she is not just addressing his marital infidelity; she is addressing his essence as a human being. Here, her resentment at manipulation becomes an attempt to re-assert her own agency over the manipulation. It illustrates her attempting to subvert her established role as submissive, compliant, predictable housewife—she will not be the wife who predictably picks up the strategically placed Heineken at the neighborhood grocery store—she will instead re-assert her authority over her own life by showing Don that she may know him better than he knows her—he has underestimated her. But on a larger level, it also exposes the resentment and anger of a population who is constantly pushed into consumption—a suburban society that has been constructed with the express purpose of consuming goods and driving the economy forward. Don's existence is dependent on this system, and therefore he is aware of something that most are not—our lives are being manipulated to comply with this goal. "A Night to Remember" represents a moment where Betty rejects the performance, where she refuses to cooperate in the lie.

Betty's physical appearance becomes a telling marker of the dismantling of the vision of Betty as perfect housewife here as well. Betty appears beautiful and

impeccably dressed at the beginning of the dinner party as she presents her special "around the world" menu. As the episode progresses and her disillusionment grows, she does not change out of the dress she wore to the dinner party, and becomes increasingly disheveled, drunk, and angry. Mabel Rosenheck discusses the deconstruction of feminine performance in the episode in the article "Swing Skirts and Swinging Singles":

> Betty wears a spaghetti strap 'New Look' gown in white silk with blue, green, and yellow polka dots. Yet the innocent femininity of the dress…is belied by the fury with which Betty approaches Don after the party...The next day the dress (which she has slept in) wrinkles and the straps fall off her shoulders as she too comes apart while searching frantically for proof of Don's infidelity. The dress no longer conveys the façade of idealized femininity, but now reflects the anxiety it sought to contain. (88)

So here we see that Betty's appearance becomes a visual deconstruction of the myth of the perfect suburban housewife that persists throughout the episode, which in turn becomes a perfect embodiment of the highly constructed false suburban ideal that Stephanie Coontz attempts to deconstruct: The anxiety that lay hidden in the suburbs of 1950s America was all the more suffocating due to the pressure among families to maintain the appearance of domestic bliss. Coontz quotes author Benita Eisler's recollections of the first evidence of fractures in this idealized portrait: "'As college classmates became close friends, I heard sagas of life at home that were Gothic horror stories. Behind the hedges and driveways of upper-middle-class suburbia were tragedies of madness, suicide, and—most prevalent of all—chronic and severe alcoholism'" (*The Way We Never Were* 32). These fissures are illustrated not just in Betty, but in the scene

of the dinner party itself, in which one of the guests is a drunken wife who misses her chair at the dinner table, and another is a recovering alcoholic who is clearly judged by the others for whom drinking is par for the course.

“A Night to Remember” is also significant with regard to Joan Holloway, as she is briefly promoted to a different position with the company, one in which she is assigned to read television scripts so that she can ensure the advertisements do not unintentionally conflict with storylines. Joan executes her new duties beautifully, and impresses the clients with her knowledge of how to monopolize on the scripts. Still, by the end of the episode, she is forced back into her old position as secretary, and a man is hired to fill the position instead. Here again, a woman’s physical appearance is emphasized when Joan, known for her hourglass figure, and using sexuality as power, rubs at the grooves left by her bra straps as she undresses at the end of her disappointing day. Again, Rosenheck points to fashion as a construction of the performative aspects of femininity here: “The story line ends with a disappointed Joan, undressing at home, rubbing her shoulder where deep red marks show the physical and emotional cost of her femininity” (91). The subtlety of this moment is misleading, as it is easily read as an understated critique of the suffocating and painful constraints placed on women during the time period; but it also alludes to the power of manipulation.

Joan, just like Betty, attempted to re-assert feminine authority by using her voice to participate in the manipulations of the culture industry. Her failure indicates her own misinterpretation of the world in which she lives, a world that she thought she thoroughly understood. Joan is not allowed to participate in the manipulations of Sterling Cooper; she is one of its manipulations. The company used and deceived her much in the way

that Don used and deceived Betty, but Joan's situation is more inescapable. Here, Joan's ability to operate so flawlessly within the male-dominated world has backfired. Her ability to mask her identity in order to obtain agency has also allowed her to be perceived as completely content within her assigned role. Joan, like Betty, has been underestimated, but Betty has the option of divorce. Joan is firmly placed "back where she belongs" ("A Night"), as a secretary.

"A Night to Remember" is key to interrogating themes of performativity, desperation, feminine disillusionment, and pervasive consumerism that seek to disrupt the traditional narrative of the time frame. Still, there are moments in the episode that seem to undermine the effort to critique the era. Betty is depicted in such an unflattering light at times that it becomes difficult to read her suffering as emblematic of the oppression intrinsic to her lifestyle. For example, in a scene that attempts to puncture the illusion of the perfect domestic housewife that Betty is attempting to construct for Don's dinner guests, Betty violently erupts in anger while trying to fix a dining room chair. While it is clear that the purpose of the scene is to undercut the performative nature of Betty's role as perfect wife and party host, it also causes the viewer to interpret her as volatile and unstable. Indeed, Betty is at times portrayed so viciously that her performance tends to evoke in the viewer feelings of sympathy for her unfaithful husband rather than her.

In addition, the fact that the episode functions as an advertisement for Heineken points to the strange duality of the series itself. *Mad Men* ostensibly acts as a critique of the advertising world, even while it is also an active participant within it. Therefore, while *Mad Men* seems able to poke holes in a nostalgic rendering of the postwar time period by exposing dysfunction and oppression, it also seems unable to escape its own

role in the culture industry. So, if Betty is upset as being "used" as a target for an advertising campaign, it would seem that the viewer of the series is in a similar predicament. In a June 2013 *New Yorker* online article entitled "The Weird Recursive *Mad Men* Ads," Ian Crouch points to the issue of product placement and its relationship to the series, specifically referencing "A Night to Remember" as the moment when the question of artistic integrity and in-show advertising became irrelevant: "In some ways worrying about whether the advertising of real products diminishes the fictional world of *Mad Men* is wasted energy at this point. It either ceased being an issue or permanently became one, when an entire episode was structured around Heineken which made a placement deal with the show's producers." Crouch's two completely oppositional interpretations here—that "[product placement] either ceased being an issue or permanently became one"—point to the sometimes irreconcilable contradictions intrinsic to the series.

In fact, just as *Mad Men* both deconstructs and reinscribes nostalgia for an era that was wrought with problems and crises, it also acts as both critic and participant in the culture industry as a whole. The fact that the series is critically acclaimed and held to the standards of "art" rather than mere entertainment evokes resentment in viewers similar to the disdain that Betty felt at being a target or pawn for the larger mechanism of the culture industry. For Adorno and Horkheimer, however, this question of whether "art" is compromised by consumerism has been rendered insignificant by the culture industry:

> If one branch of art follows the same formula as one with a very different medium and content...if a movement from a Beethoven symphony is crudely 'adapted' for a film soundtrack in the same way as a Tolstoy novel

> is garbled in a film script: then the claim that this is done to satisfy...the public is no more than hot air. We are closer to the facts if we explain these phenomena as inherent in the…apparatus, which, down to its last cog, itself forms part of the economic mechanism of selection. In addition there is the agreement…of all executive authorities not to produce or sanction anything that in any way differs from their own rules, their own ideas about consumers, or above all themselves. (1225)

So we see that, for Adorno and Horkheimer, the content of a film or television show is unimportant, as it is merely a vehicle in order to achieve the ultimate goal of creating consumption. Read in this context, *Mad Men's* critiques of consumerism are rendered powerless, as they are unable to communicate anything other than a message that has been constructed from within the culture industry itself. So, just as Betty is aware of Don's manipulations yet still readily conforms to the role of both housewife and consumer, and does so in exactly the way he predicts, the viewer of *Mad Men* participates in a critique of advertising and consumerism even as they are being manipulated as well. The final line of the passage above reinforces the idea that conformity to prescribed roles is a fundamental aspect of the orchestrators of the culture industry—nothing will differ from their rules, their ideas, or themselves. "A Night to Remember," therefore, is a layered and complex vision of conformity and performance intrinsic to domestic suburban life in the postwar, postmodern era.

Because suburban life, as well as Don's career on Madison Avenue, creates strict and oppressive roles for the characters of *Mad Men* to exist within, the characters on the series, like the Wheelers, seek alternate landscapes as a means of escaping the

containment imposed on them through images of the ideal of suburbia. Unlike the Wheelers, the characters in *Mad Men* seem able to escape their identities and existences, at least temporarily, especially because of the nature of the serialized narrative structure of the show. In other words, whereas the first two seasons of the series focus on a mostly clearly cut dichotomy between Madison Avenue and the suburbs, subsequent seasons often feature episodes that take place in alternate, more liberal, or more anonymous spaces where the characters are able to shed aspects of their identities. It seems that these episodes serve to offer a means of providing a sort of counter-narrative that acts in opposition to the insular containment culture of the suburbs. In addition, they establish spaces that are not the city or the suburbs—spaces that resist being fixed or totalized as either/or, spaces that exist independently of a more well-established dichotomy. These spaces offer glimpses of the resistance to societal norms and structures because they are neither related to the domestic nor the career; they are places where the rules do not apply.

The episode "The Jet Set" also occurs in the second season of the series, three episodes after "A Night to Remember," and Don and Betty's relationship has rapidly deteriorated. Don and his co-worker Pete Campbell take a trip to California to meet with potential clients. California is immediately portrayed in stark contrast to the scenes set in New York City and Ossining. The scenes are brightly lit, the extras are all dressed beautifully, and everyone is so tan that they appear to be glowing. At the beginning of the episode, Don has his mind set on work, resisting Pete's urges to even take a swim in the hotel pool. The next day, we see Don and Pete viewing a presentation by a defense company about nuclear missiles. The presentation directly references cold-war tactics

against Russia, threatening that one of its missiles would have the effect of “three Nagasakis” (“The Jet Set”). The scene, which specifically references cold-war paranoia and containment culture, immediately precedes a scene where Don spontaneously decides to skip the rest of the convention and go to Palm Springs with a young woman named Joy, who propositions him in the hotel lobby. Don’s decision to leave immediately after the defense presentation implies a rejection of not just his responsibilities to Sterling Cooper, but also a rejection of a way of life in which he must conform to the expectations of the cold-war era. Don has no desire to discuss how many Russians will be killed by nuclear warheads; he silently rejects the status quo, and decides to join the free-spirited Joy and her mysteriously wealthy Bohemian friends.

Once Don arrives at the spacious, beautiful California home where Joy is staying with a strange collection of people, to whom she refers as “nomads,” he becomes less and less grounded in his own identity, mostly because he is unable to establish fixed identities for the people who he encounters. Joy’s use of the word “nomads” here serves to emphasize a lack of structure as well as a sense of placelessness. Don is unable to reconcile the freedom that Joy and her cohorts enjoy. He incessantly repeats the questions: “Who are you? What do you people do? I guess you are all well-off?” (“The Jet Set”). At one point he becomes so disoriented by the lack of traditional and rigid social structures that he actually loses control of his physical body and faints. Upon waking up, he is told that he has “heat exhaustion,” a fact that further cements his status as a fish-out-of-water. Joy gives him a new set of clothing, and he quickly adopts a more relaxed, yet still confused demeanor. At dinner, Joy’s vaguely European housemates play a game in which each person has to name a place that begins with the last letter of

the previously named place. The result is each guest of the dinner party yelling out the names of exotic cities all over the world, thereby emphasizing the existences of places outside of New York City and its suburbs. That night, just before Don is about to go to bed with Joy, he demands once more—"Who are you?" to which she simply replies "I'm Joy" ("The Jet Set"). So we see that her identity is not fixed—it is a feeling, an emotion, something for Don to experience, rather than an identity strictly assigned to a person who has a rigid social role to which she must conform.

The stark difference in the lives of the people of Sterling Cooper in comparison to the people at Don's dinner party is further emphasized when the episode's narrative returns to the events at the ad agency. Peggy has a date to see Bob Dylan in the Village with one of the newer copywriters, Kurt, who is originally from Germany. When the other men in the creative department begin to tease Peggy and Kurt about their date, Kurt promptly and matter-of-factly proclaims that he is "homosexual" and has no interest in Peggy. Of course, the entire office is utterly shocked and dumbfounded by the revelation, including Sal, who is closeted himself. After Kurt leaves, his friend Smitty shrugs the incident off, saying "He's from Europe. It's different there" ("The Jet Set"), once again reestablishing the idea that alternate spaces allow for the rejection of the strict moral codes and gender roles of postwar America.

Of course, the men of Sterling Cooper quickly reject Kurt's subversive lifestyle by saying "I knew queers existed. I never wanted to work with one" ("The Jet Set"). The alternatives to strict societal norms are further established when we encounter Don in bed with Joy, and one of her male friends enters the room and sits on their bed. He refers to Don as 'beautiful,' and then casually reveals that he is Joy's father. Don's confusion

upon hearing this news mirrors the shock of the men at the ad agency upon hearing the truth about Kurt, especially because of the homoerotic overtones to the exchange. Of course, Don is also completely taken aback by the fact that a woman's father seems to feel perfectly comfortable conversing with her while she lies in bed with a man with whom she has just had sex. Therefore, the scene emphasizes the idea of different realities, areas that exist beyond the periphery of the conservatively ordered worlds of Madison Avenue and the American suburb. In other words, here, California and Europe function as spaces where the social order can be subverted without consequence.

The episode that takes place immediately after "The Jet Set" is "The Mountain King," which was referenced here earlier in regard to the rape of Joan Holloway, Sterling Cooper's office manager. "The Mountain King" also features Don's trip to visit Anna Draper, the wife of the "real" Don Draper, who also lives in California. So, when Don visits Anna at her airy, bright, beachside home, he is actually not Don at all, but Dick Whitman, the person he was before he deserted the army during the Korean War. As usual, Anna's significance is revealed through flashbacks, thereby emphasizing the disorienting nature of time and temporality as recurring themes throughout the series. Through these flashbacks we witness Don desperately trying to convince her that there has been a mix-up and he has not stolen her dead husband's identity.

As the episode progresses, it becomes clear that Don is completely different when he is in Anna's care. He relinquishes his brooding, mysterious demeanor and becomes boyish and almost goofy. He communes with the neighbors over hot-rod cars, fixes Anna's broken chair (in stark contrast to his refusal to fix Betty's broken chair in "A Night to Remember"), and even admits to her that he "screwed everything up" with

regard to Betty and his children. In short, he becomes a much more real human being—he is aware of his flaws and willing to confront them in ways he has never done at home in the suburbs. In fact, we even witness Don, in flashback again, on Christmas Eve with Anna, boyishly and nervously describing the new love of his life, Betty. The scene inspires a wave of sympathy for Don, who we finally see was once completely enamored with his wife. Anna, while reading Don's tarot cards declares "The only thing keeping you from being happy is the belief that you are alone" ("The Mountain King"). As the episode ends, Don is seen slowly walking into the ocean as lines from the song "The Cup of Loneliness" begin to play over the scene: "I see Christian pilgrims/So redeemed from sin/Called out of darkness/A new life to begin" (Jones). So we see that, where Don's experiences with the bohemians of "The Jet Set" allowed him to commune with "joy" and freedom from conformity, his experiences in "The Mountain King" allow him to experience redemption. Indeed, Anna is the one person who not only knows the truth about Don, but has also forgiven him for all of his misdeeds. Through her tarot reading, she performs a ritual that offers him hope for the future. So, we can read Don's trip to California as a joyful, redemptive journey that allows him to commune with himself in ways that he is unable to while confined in the constricting spaces of his home and his work.

Author Keith Wilhite also addresses the totalizing nature of the suburbs as a creator of meaning in "Contested Terrain." Indeed, it would seem that the suburbs' fractal expansion has displaced the natural landscape, and along with it, the possibility of a pastoral reading" (321). Clearly, the suburbs of *Mad Men* also resist a "pastoral reading;" in order to engage in the creation of the pastoral, the joyful, the redemptive, the

narrative must move outside the highly "contested terrain" of the suburban landscape, as well as beyond the anonymity that Don enjoys in the city. The notion of the pastoral is reflected in the episode when Don pulls Frank O'Hara's *Meditations in an Emergency* from Anna's shelf and asks her if she enjoyed it. The title poem of the book addresses, and seems to reject, the idea of intermediate spaces as areas of possibility:

> However, I have never clogged myself with the praises of pastoral life, nor with nostalgia for an innocent past of perverted acts in pastures. No. One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes—I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally *regret* life. (38)

So here it would seem that Don rejects the notion of the pastoral, and instead embraces the mass production and consumption synonymous with city life. However, when he asks Anna how she felt about it she replies, "It made me worry about you" ("The Mountain King"). Anna, who seems to have a much more acute awareness of the truth about Don than even he has, seems to know that Don does indeed need to leave the "confines" of New York in order to save himself. The urban and suburban have replaced the natural, and Don therefore is unable to be his natural 'self' within that space. For Don, California functions as a space that subverts the traditional social order and thereby allows him the freedom to rediscover the self.

If California serves as a space for Don to discover his true self, then Europe, or more specifically, Rome, functions as a space for Don and Betty to exist as something that we have never seen: a loving, happily married couple. In the episode entitled

"Souvenir," which takes place in season three of the series, after Don has returned from California, and at a time when Don and Betty's marriage remains rocky at best, Betty decides at the last minute to accompany Don on a business trip to Rome. Immediately preceding her decision to join him, Betty is unfaithful to Don; she kisses Henry Francis, the man for whom she will eventually leave Don, outside of a town council meeting. However, once they arrive in Rome, Don and Betty are transformed into the picture of marital bliss. Interestingly, their admiration of each other seems dependent on the ability to perceive each other through the perspectives of others. Don seems to relish in the attention that Betty receives from numerous Italian men, and Betty seems impressed by Conrad Hilton's appreciation for Don. The outside perspective that is emphasized here again illuminates the power of the space outside of their life in Ossining. Once they are able to see each other through the eyes of another, the dynamic of their relationship completely changes.

Betty's escape to Rome is further highlighted by the fact that she was fully immersed in a community project—saving the town reservoir—before she went on the trip. She was performing the role of the concerned domestic housewife—guarding the protected space of her community from ruin. The difference between the Betty at home and the Betty in Rome is immense. Betty speaks fluent Italian, a fact that immediately distances her from her usual role as housewife. Her appearance is markedly different as well. She visits the hair salon and her usual girlish bob is transformed into a high, elegant up-do. The brightly colored, "new-look" feminine dresses that she usually wears are also conspicuously absent; she wears a sleek, black cocktail dress instead. Don and Betty even venture as far as to actually pretend that they do not know each other when

Don arrives at the hotel restaurant, effectively discarding their highly domesticated identities of husband and wife. The entire trip is a whirlwind of admiration, desire, and eventually lust, as they engage in passionate sex in their hotel room overlooking the ancient city. The tension between old and new is very clearly emphasized here. Betty's fight to save a town reservoir in the middle of a newly constructed, inorganic, planned community seems petty and frivolous in comparison to the beautiful, sprawling city of Rome that is visible from Don and Betty's hotel room window. The city of Rome obviously exists as a space in stark contrast to the suburbs outside of New York City, and the distinction between high culture and mass culture are decidedly obvious here.

Upon the return home to their picturesque house in the suburbs, Don and Betty are immediately bombarded with the mundane details of their actual lives. The nanny informs Betty that her children have been fighting, and Don quickly retreats into his usual silent complacence, excusing himself as Betty has to deal with disciplining the children. Later, Betty's friend and neighbor Francine gives her more disappointing news; she thinks they lost their battle to save the reservoir. At the end of the episode, Betty erupts in despair when Don asks her what is wrong, questioning him: "What do you think is wrong?" ("Souvenir"). She then shouts that she hates her friends, the town, and her life. Don, attempting to cheer her up, gives her a souvenir—a bracelet charm from the hotel gift shop. Betty sadly replies, "Now I'll have something to look at when I tell people about the time we went to Rome"("Souvenir"). Here, the similarities between April Wheeler and Betty Draper are vividly obvious. Betty and April both wish to exist in a space where their lives consist of more than children, junior leagues, and community theater productions. They want to escape to a place where their educations and talents

can be put to use, where they can feel fulfilled. For Don Draper and Frank Wheeler, escape is necessary but temporary—they are able to seek, and find fulfillment, in the spaces outside of their suburban homes. They have the ability to seek satisfaction in their professional lives, and they both seek mistresses to provide what their wives, due to their perpetual unhappiness, cannot. For April and Betty, however, escape is the only means to find happiness. Indeed, even when they do engage in infidelity, it only exacerbates their misery. In fact, Betty and April are both incredulous as to how Frank and Don could possibly be blind to the fact that they are miserable in their suburban homes. When April first discusses her plan to move with Frank, she says, "I don't have to tell you what is wrong," just as Betty questions "What do you think is wrong?" In order for Betty and April to remedy what is wrong, they must be able to carve out an existence outside of the contained space of the suburbs where they are forced to perform roles that leave them fundamentally unfulfilled.

CONCLUSION

While the similarities between the Drapers and the Wheelers are clearly pronounced, the multiple temporalities and serial nature of *Mad Men's* narrative structure create an obvious distinction between the two narratives overall. While *Revolutionary Road* is engaged with and interpreted as a product of the postwar time frame in which it was produced, *Mad Men* is resistant to closure and, therefore, its meaning continues to shift. In addition, *Mad Men's* complex and troubled relationship to nostalgia, the culture industry, and the past it is attempting to portray continues to disrupt and complicate the messages it is attempting to convey. In fact, one of *Mad Men*'s most interesting confrontations of nostalgia occurred in the season finale of its most recent season. Don, who seems increasingly unstable, and appears to finally be suffering the effects of tobacco and alcohol addiction, gives a stunningly beautiful presentation to the Hershey chocolate company in which he draws, once again, on childhood memories and false nostalgia. In a scene that deliberately draws on the nostalgia presentation from "The Wheel," Don once again gives a mesmerizing performance, describing how wonderful and loved he felt as a child when his father would buy him a Hershey bar. The clients are visibly impressed, but Don suddenly reverses course and reveals that everything he just said was a lie. He did not have a father; he grew up in a whorehouse, and the only time he received a Hershey bar was after he had stolen money from one of the clients, and was therefore subsequently rewarded with the chocolate. It is a jarring departure from the lies he has created over all the episodes before it, and it ultimately results in a meeting where

he is basically fired. (He is officially suspended indefinitely.) The episode ends with Don showing his children the actual house where he spent his childhood. So it appears that this episode ultimately represents yet another attempt to finally deconstruct the very nostalgia that it engenders. It seems that here, the writers and producers are challenging the viewers to finally address our own collective history honestly.

Still, it seems that despite all of our attempts to expose and interrogate the oppression, repression, and anxiety that infected the era of the 1950s and early 60s, the romanticization of the time period persists in American culture. Films such as *Pleasantville*, *Far From Heaven*, and even the film version of *Revolutionary Road* seem to display a desire to re-visit and disrupt romantic notions of the era; yet ultimately nostalgia seems to override those disruptions. A recent poll conducted by the magazine *The Economist* asked readers to determine to which decade of the twentieth century they would most like to return. The unequivocal winner was the 1950s, with the 1960s coming in second. So the question remains, why do we remain fixated on an era that was so wrought with repression, disparity, and isolationism? Stephanie Coontz would argue that it is not the conservatism and isolation that we crave, but rather the economic prosperity, job security, and social safety nets. Perhaps even more interestingly, she claims that groups who were oppressed during the time period, such as women, African Americans, and other minority groups, miss having something concrete to push against—a clear establishment to resist, rather than the more nebulous, institutionalized forms of oppression that exist today. Indeed, specifically with regard to advertising, I think we somehow cannot resist the appeal of the naïve innocence that allowed us to embrace products without worrying about ill health, the environment, or other consequences.

Still, however, ultimately, our fixation on the postwar era does seem to be borne out of an inability to reconcile our past. For one, the fact that we insist on clinging onto whitewashed, sanitized versions of our often dark and ugly past seems to have indeed become a pathological impulse in the collective American imagination. The suburbs have become a perfect image for the wholesome America from which we wish we had come. In a way it would seem that nostalgia for the postwar era and the idyllic suburban lifestyle has become symbolic of what the suburbs themselves once were. In other words, by evoking a false nostalgia for the era, we are able to enforce our own culture of containment, our own constructed space in which the harsh realities of the external—the racism, sexism, and myriad other forms of oppression that plagued the time period—can be kept at bay. Here again our pathological failure becomes obvious. If we seem to wish to ignore the issues that plagued the past, we will never be able to functionally address the problems of today. Indeed, many of the issues that I have discussed here continue to be problematic in contemporary society. It seems that in our post-9/11 culture, we have increasingly returned to a society that demands surveillance and conformity, at hitherto unheard of levels, and our paranoia regarding terrorism certainly mirrors the paranoia of the Cold-War era. Additionally, issues that seemed to have been resolved during the Feminist and Civil Rights movements that were borne out of a resistance to the repression and oppression of the postwar era have suddenly become headlines again, as laws dealing with women's reproductive rights and even the Voting Rights Act have steadily lost power. So perhaps our fixation on the time period is not completely pathological. Perhaps it is as paradoxical and reproducible as the texts discussed here would have us

believe. We look back in order to distance ourselves from what we were, while at the same time clinging onto a false nostalgia for what never really was there to begin with.

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