

The dilemma of happiness presented in *Mad Men*

Mad Men is one of the American best quality television shows. The long list of awards and positive critiques have shown that the show itself is a masterpiece, created with great dedication. This television series not only has an authentic and interesting plot but also sophisticated themes integrated carefully in the storyline of each character. One of the most important themes in *Mad Men* is happiness, delivered by the concept of the American Dream. This paper focuses on analyzing what the American Dream's real definition, how happiness is perceived by *Mad Men*'s characters in episode 12, as well as why humans need concepts such as the American Dream and happiness. Although *Mad Men* takes place in the world of Madison Avenue advertising, it was never really about advertising but instead uses advertising to enhance and to present the concept of happiness. The show is set in the 1960s, but the American Dream and happiness themes accurately reflect the same dilemma that people in today's world are dealing with when it comes to being happy; this dilemma is a never-ending loop consists of expectation, disappointment, emptiness.

First of all, this paper will construct different possible meanings of the American Dream based on various storylines in *Mad Men*. The American Dream most often refers to ideas of pursuing material prosperity, a fulfilling life, and high social status. Each individual has different approaches to the concept of the Dream. Some say that the American Dream is all about getting richer — work more hours to get fancier homes, obtain a higher paycheck, and achieve higher social status. For instance, Peggy Olson shows a desire for getting a better position in her workplace in episode 12. She gets tired of sharing an office with the Xerox machine. Thus, after winning the Popsicle account by herself, without any help from Don, she confidently requests

Roger to give her a private office because she believes she deserves it. As Jeremy G. Butler points out, “To have an office, a large, preferably corner, office, is an obvious symbol of power.” (61) Peggy proves that she now has a certain power simply by owning an office, an achievement that many males cannot obtain, females in the 1960s can only dream of. Another character who strongly illustrates the American Dream as material gains and power is Harry Crane. His position as the head of the TV Department at Sterling Cooper follows from his jealousy of Ken Cosgrove’s unexpectedly high paycheck (2.03). And now in episode 12, Harry, once again, shows his enormous jealousy toward Peggy. He is clearly not happy with Peggy’s new office. Thus, material prosperity and power role are ultimate dreams of many people, such as Harry’s and Peggy’s stories in *Mad Men*. If they fail to achieve their constructed American Dream, they might not be able to feel happy.

To many other Americans, achieving the American Dream is only to have a simple and fulfilling life. Trudy is an excellent representation for this group of people who just want to have a happy, idealized family. Her Dream is to have a husband with a well-established financial status, as well as to have healthy kids, a typical American family model. Unfortunately, Trudy and Pete Campbell, her beloved husband, cannot have children together. However, she doesn’t give up and continuously suggests the idea of adopting an orphan. Pete, on the other hand, resists the idea of adoption. In episode 12, Pete even gives up the Clearasil account, a business contract with his father-in-law, because he wants to protect his dictatorial role in the Campbell marriage; ironically, Pete win the Clearasil account only because he made a promise to Trudy’s father that he would make her feel happy. After he fails to keep the promise, the Clearasil contract is also broken. To Trudy, not achieving the idealized model family is ruining her life. Viewers can see

that Trudy is unable to feel happy because her marriage is not what she expected, especially in episode 12, where her marriage is falling apart.

Various examples above show that the American Dream can have many different meanings, depending on the individual. However, a person can also have many different Dreams. A person's Dreams can be constructed and altered depending on their current wants and needs in a certain period of time. How characters in *Mad Men*, and perhaps the audience as well, come up with different beliefs about the Dream depends on three components: unlimited wants, the concept of happiness, and socially constructed ideas. *Mad Men* frequently touches on the idea of the American Dream. It carefully uses the storylines to present and to critique the process of how one decides what his or her Dream is, without directly addressing this perennially controversial topic. It is important to understand that *Mad Men* doesn't directly discuss the topic of happiness and the Dream. The reason is that to some extent, one of *Mad Men*'s main purposes is still to entertain its audience. Thus, it only integrates this topic in fictional characters' desires and actions instead of directly triggering the debate to avoid destroying the American Dream's fantasy. Viewers who watch *Mad Men* purely because of the entertaining purpose can fully enjoy the fantasy created by the show. In addition, viewers who seek authentic and sophisticated ideas can also enjoy the show in a more analytical and rational way.

The first element in the process of constructing the American Dream is unlimited wants. It is presented in each and every fictional character in *Mad Men* to reflect the fact that human beings are very selfish and there is never "enough". For example, Peggy's current American Dream can be interpreted as to have an equal level of respect with her male co-workers, and to have a good position in the company. She wants to be respected because she was disrespected

when she first came to Sterling Cooper as a secretary. Moreover, Peggy wants to have a good career because she comes from a working-class family. Her current priority is, thus, being respected and having a good career. To get to this current Dream, Peggy has achieved several other so-called “American Dreams”: getting hired by a good company, doing well at her job as a secretary, becoming a part of the marketing team, and finally, in episode 12, having her own office and a good standing position in the company. Trudy, on the other hand, doesn’t really want money or social position because she already has them. Instead, unlike the typical American family, Trudy cannot have kids with her husband. Thus, her Dream focuses more on having a happy family with lovely kids. In other words, people want things that they don’t currently have. Once a person successfully fulfills his or her wants and needs, s/he will experience satisfaction. Once they successfully achieve their desired American Dream, a new one will be instantly created. There is no static American Dream that is permanent or enough in itself.

Then comes the concept of happiness, the second element in the process of constructing one’s own belief about the Dream. It is also the second major analysis of this paper: how *Mad Men* introduces and portrays happiness to its audience. Happiness is a word that people use to describe a sensation. It is simply a name (or concept) that is socially constructed to describe the feeling of achieving wants or needs — a powerful yet temporary taste of satisfaction. Despite all different American Dreams described earlier, the bottom line is that everyone wants to be able to feel happy permanently. However, since there is never “enough” due to the humans’ unlimited wants, the word “permanently” is more like a belief that people choose to believe rather than a

fact. Due to this chosen belief, most people decide to seek happiness everywhere else but in the present moment.

For instance, when a student is miserably studying for overwhelming exams, s/he tends to tell himself or herself “I’m very tired and stressed, but as soon as I finish all the work, I will be happy.” Or someone wholeheartedly believes that s/he will reach his or her permanent happiness as soon as s/he graduates from college, acquires dream jobs, and has a perfect family just like those presented in any romantic movie. But sadly, when s/he successfully achieves all the Dreams, s/he can only feel satisfied for a very short moment — not permanent as expected. Then there comes another new bigger dream that is waiting to be pursued. This way of believing provides motivations for people to keep moving on. However, it also prevents people from allowing themselves to be able to feel happy. People know this, but for some unexplained reasons, they still choose to believe that they can obtain permanent happiness when they achieve their Dreams. Therefore, characters in *Mad Men*, and perhaps the audience, can never really feel happy even when they get what they want. As Elisabeth Bronfen points out, “a happy person never phantasies, only an unsatisfied one” and “the work of fantasy is itself predicated on jumping backwards and forwards in time.” (53) These two quotes support the argument that people never believe happiness is something that can be obtained in the present moment. To them, happiness is something belongs to either the past or the future, but never the present.

Joan Holloway is a perfect example of this theory of being happy. She is, in a sense, considered to be a successful woman in the 1960s. Joan is currently engaged to Greg Harris, a very handsome and successful doctor. Joan seems to have everything she has ever wanted. She is respected by many co-workers; she is the dream of many men; she is the ideal image for many

women at the time. However, there are many scenes that show her unhappiness. For instance, in episode 12 at 13:28, when Joan tries to take control in a love-making scene, Greg immediately loses his interests and breaks the romantic energy between the two of them. He seems to be an old-fashioned guy, who doesn't care about his girlfriend's feeling. Joan is confused and sad. At 30:00, he visits the office and detects that Roger seems to know Joan very well. Due to his jealousy, he punishes Joan by raping her in Don's office. A date that is supposed to be full of romance is turning into a terrible night for Joan. She is shocked by Greg's action. She tries to resist hopelessly with all her strength but there is nothing she can do. When Greg presses Joan's face to a side on the floor, she can only look at one fixed direction. Unlike happy women who usually close their eyes and enjoy the romantic moment with their boyfriend, Joan opens her eyes widely with a bit angry, speechless and hopeless. A close-up shot of Joan's face reflects that she is confused, uncomfortable, lost and clearly not happy. Moreover, the position of her face is captured in the middle of 3 legs of the dark brown chair as if she is the prisoner in her own romantic relationship. It is even scarier when the camera shifts its focus onto the empty space that Joan is forced to look at — restricted, imprisoned, and controlled. In addition, the integrated traffic sound also adds up the effect of the uncomfortable and troublesome feeling.

The described scene above shows that Joan is unhappy with Greg's actions. However, she still acts like she is happy with this relationship even after he rapes her. When Peggy compliments Joan on Greg's handsomeness and asks about the wedding, Joan maintains a positive face. She even says nice things about her future husband and says that they will have a wedding in December. To Joan, Greg is the perfect guy to fill the husband role because he is handsome and very successful in term of finance and social status. She doesn't stop this

relationship because she believes that marrying Greg will fulfill her American Dream or that she will feel happy after marrying him. However, she does not feel happy in the present moment. It is also clear that she will not feel happy when she achieves her Dream — her marriage with Greg. Joan is letting the false expectation of the Dream control her decisions. Similar to Joan, many other *Mad Men*'s characters, as well as the audience, are letting the illusion of the permanent happiness, delivered by the completion of the American Dream, control their decisions and actions. However, this expectation of being happy will never be met because happiness is a word used to describe a sensation, which only happens in the present moment.

The third element that helps shape the meaning of the Dream is the socially constructed ideas and images. A few ways to integrate these ideas into people's subconsciousness is via culture, religions, movies, education and the most efficient method which is presented in *Mad Men* is advertising. In season 1, episode 1, Don mentions that "Advertising is based on one thing: happiness. And do you know what happiness is? Happiness is the smell of a new car. It's freedom from fear. It's a billboard on the side of a road that screams with reassurance that whatever you're doing is OK." This quote reflects that happiness is the core of advertising. If Don and his team can get consumers to believe that they will feel happy after buying a certain product, they are creating good ads. In other words, the ad man is taking advantage of people's belief in happiness. They are the one that creates false expectations. They give the consumers ideas like you will feel the permanent happiness when you buy this car, or this product can fix your unhappy problems. However, buying the desired product can only give consumers a temporary feeling of satisfaction, not the type of happiness as advertised.

For example, Peggy wins her Popsicle account because she successfully creates the ads that show the happy feeling of kids while eating the popsicle. She plays with words to make people believe that they love the popsicle, even in the winter, and that this product can make their life happier: “You take it, break it, share it, and love it. This act of sharing, it’s what a popsicle is.” Ironically, as William Siska points out: “For Don, advertising is a metaphor for moving beyond the traditional concern with a product’s quality to the personal preoccupation with how the consumer feels when he or she consumes it.” (204) What the ad sells is not the product but rather the emotional feeling called happiness that is tied to this product. There is no information about how the product is made or the negative effect of eating the popsicle. Only the positive energy and happy images are presented. This Popsicle example from *Mad Men* reflects the reality of how the advertising industry works in both the 1960s and in today’s world. When consumers buy iPhone, the majority of buyers don’t check the specifications of the phone. Instead, they buy the newest version of iPhone because Apple successfully persuades its customers that this new product is the next new thing and that owning this product can make you feel more sophisticated, make your life better and happier. However, there is no confirmation that Apple’s products are the best in the market. To sum up, people let socially constructed ideas and images, created by advertising, manipulate our ways of thinking and our decisions.

A lot of people know that socially constructed ideas are used as a tool to manipulate them but they still willingly allow those images to control their thinking. Christopher Bigsby mentions in her book, *Viewing America: Twenty-First-Century Television Drama*, that “Life seems to have no purpose but we have to go on behaving as though it does.” (394) This quote contributes to the idea that false expectations and images, created by advertising, education, culture, movies, and so

forth, are necessary because they give people motivations to keep going. If life doesn't initially have any real purpose, humans self-provide. This is also the last main theme of this paper. In season 1, episode 8, Don brings up a very important concept that "There is no big lie, there is no system, the universe is indifferent." Don is a type of person that knows the world well, perhaps too well. He experiences it all; he re-creates himself and achieves a lot of American Dreams, such as having a really good career, obtaining a high social status, and creating a perfect family with 2 beautiful children. Yet, Don is unable to feel happy; perhaps, he doesn't believe in happiness.

To Don, as an ad man, American Dreams and happiness are just fantasies and concepts created by people like him. However, even when his logical mind tells him that "the universe is indifferent," his trip to California in episode 12 proves that Don is capable of believing in the concept of happiness. *Mad Men* presents California as a very happy place, a close version to the utopia land. Don buys this whole idea about California and comes to this place to seek his own version of happiness. He shares with Anna, who is the wife of the real Don Draper, that "I have been watching my life... It's right there. I keep scratching at it, trying to get into it. But I can't." (19:47) Don can't really get into his own life because his life in New York is full of acting and pretending. In contrast, while sharing his true thoughts with Anna, he is allowing himself to live in the present moment. In New York, he is an observer. In California, he is a participant. The audience can see that Don is a lot more relaxed and relieved in his stay in California; he doesn't put on his acting face while being with Anna Draper.

As David Marc describes Don's situation: "Fulfillment is difficult for him to envision, perhaps impossible to achieve, because the life he has made is an unending series of seductions:

clients, mistresses, neighbours and, of course, the buying public.” (232) Don cannot envision because he doesn’t have any real purpose in life. He deals with whatever hits him as life goes on instead of making careful plans on what to accomplish next. As his life is being torn apart, he desperately needs a motivation to keep going. And California is his answer. The scene at 15:32 really captures Don in his considerably happy and comfort zone. He is sitting at the very beautiful and airy balcony garden. Anna is hanging him a bottle of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer. Beautiful plants and colorful flowers are all over the background, which triggers a sense of lively and relaxing environment. The shell decoration is also captured in the shot to reflect the freshness and dreamy feeling of the beach in LA. Additionally, the balcony has a beautiful wind chime made with vintage silverware. This whole scene brings forth an illustrious fantasy that is the American Dream. The paradise imagery draws viewers into the scene. This creates a sense that the viewers themselves want to experience. Don is seeking his Dream in this little balcony garden located in the dreamy California. He lets Anna help him out by listening to her advice. He is curious about the Tarot card reading. He allows himself to have some sort of purposes by suspending his belief of the idea that “the universe is indifferent.”

If even Don, the representation of creators of happiness, needs to believe in happiness in order to add spices to his life, everyone might want to allow themselves to be manipulated in order to find motivation and purposes in life. Without purposes, life is meaningless. Without motivations, people can’t keep going. Thus, the dilemma of happiness is, in fact, a never-ending loop consists of expectation, disappointment, emptiness. People give themselves purposes, dreams and high expectations. Then when they achieve those goals, it’s likely that they will feel disappointed because this is not the permanent happiness that they are seeking. After a series of

disappointment, people might feel empty and lost. However, if they want to keep moving and add meaning to their life, they have to allow themselves to enter the first step of the loop again, which is expectations. *Mad Men* addresses, in a very real way, who we were and are. It uses the storyline of each fictional character to reflect and to critique the real situations and problems that people in reality has been dealing with.

Works cited

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