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JFK, Don Draper, and the New Sentimentality

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The semiotic similarities between JFK and Don Draper are unmistakable. Each is tall, handsome, and typically turned out in a custom-made dark suit with a matching skinny tie. Their demeanors are outwardly cool but sexy; old-school handsome if a bit aloof; elegant in style while projecting a kind of ironic intelligence.

They both embody what David Newman and Robert Benton characterized in a feature article for Esquire in July 1964 as 'The New Sentimentality.' By that time, the Kennedy mystique was reaching mythic proportions in the immediate wake of his assassination on November 22, 1963, which in turn ushered in the Sixties and all the major historical and cultural currents that are usually associated with that era in America, such as the civil rights movement, President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society, the generation gap, rock 'n' roll music, the Vietnam War, student protests, women's liberation, the rise of the counterculture and the subsequent backlash by the silent majority, among many other seismic developments.

Surely these events and issues simmered for years beneath the placid exterior of postwar America before finally boiling over with a pent-up fury that took many people in the country by surprise. Indeed, this seemingly calm cultural period before the storm belongs more to the Fifties than the Sixties and fully informs the first three seasons of Mad Men. Historian Daniel Boorstin once observed that the 'most popular' method of organizing historical periods is in yearly, decade-long, and 'hundred year packages.' Historians like to bundle years in ways that make sense, provide continuity and link past to present (Boorstin 37). More often than not, though, history is not that neat and clean. For all intents and purposes, the era known as the Sixties did not kick into high gear until after JFK was gone and America had experienced the shock of his passing. This turbulent and transformative period also extended well into the early-to-mid 1970s in the U.S., culminating with Watergate and the withdrawal of the last American troops from Vietnam in April 30, 1975.

One of the most distinguishing and innovative aspects of Mad Men so far is that the series has spent 37 of its 39 episodes on the front of the decade before the Kennedy assassination—a time that has been largely suppressed and long forgotten in popular culture—and with good reason. Mad Men exposes much of the over-the-top and out-in-the-open sexism, racism, adultery, homophobia and anti-Semitism, not to mention all the excessive smoking and drinking that sparked much of the ongoing reevaluation of the 'Old Sentimentality' that began in the Sixties. The comparative-historical sociologist, Eleanor Townsley, refers to the Sixties in hindsight as a "trope" that 'denotes a definitive break between "then" and "now."' She classifies the Sixties as an 'originary point' that identifies 'a break or major change in American history, after which nothing is the same' (Townsley 105-106). Historian Stephan Feuchtwang similarly uses the term, 'caesura,' to 'refer to points of before and after that inaugurate a present and demarcate a past.'
He adds that 'such caesurae are mythic: they mark the moment of creation of a relative past, the before of a given event and the after of a new present' (Feuchtwang 180).

In their modish excitement, David Newman and his collaborator Robert Benton, who later won an Oscar for their original screenplay of *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), were describing a 'caesura' in 1964 when they heralded the emergence of a 'New Sentimentality, but nobody knows it exists.' Their article confirmed a 'changeover' that 'came in the Fifties. Eisenhower was a key figure, perhaps the last bloom of the Old Sentimentality,' grounded in an absolute faith in country, church, and good common sense (25). In no particular order, Newman and Benton named Lenny Bruce, Audrey Hepburn, Francois Truffaut, the Beatles, Roy Lichenstein, Jean Shrimpton, and Malcolm X as representative purveyors of a 'New Sentimentality.' They are part of a 'vanguard' who lived by 'a different set of rules, of concepts, and, most importantly, of attitudes' (31). The acknowledged exemplars of this 'New Sentimentality' were still 'Mr. and Mrs. John F. Kennedy' because 'they created a style that succeeded' (25). Even in death, JFK remained a prototype for the future to many; his image was forever frozen in time at a point before the assassination, always poised above the rest as a harbinger of enlightened change.

'Jack and Jackie were impresarios of style' during the early 1960s, writes journalist and Kennedy chronicler Laurence Leamer. 'The Kennedys' achievement was to turn style into substance and to celebrate the opening up of broad new cultural and social vistas that would never again be shut down' (573-574). It is no accident, then, that Matthew Weiner, the creator, executive producer, head writer, and showrunner of *Mad Men*, utilized Jack and Jackie Kennedy more so than any other historical figures in shaping the parameters of his serial narrative. In the first episode entitled 'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,' for example, senior partner Roger Sterling asks Don Draper to 'think about the product: he's young, handsome, beautiful wife, Navy hero, honestly Don, it shouldn't be hard to convince America Dick Nixon is a winner.' Once again, Sterling-Cooper, a second-tier white-shoe Madison Avenue ad agency, is on the wrong side of history. As with the candidates themselves, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy was the more signature beauty, not Pat Nixon. She was educated, cultured, and well-to-do. Jackie symbolized the ultimate trophy wife for members of the World War II generation.

In the first episode of the second season, 'For Those Who Think Young' (i.e., the 'New Sentimentality'), Jackie Kennedy is presented as the arbiter of taste for both her husband and the rest of America in NBC's 'A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy,' which was seen by more than 56 million Americans when it was first telecast on February 14, 1962 (as well as by Don and Betty Draper, Sal and Kitty Romano, and Joan Holloway with her doctor boyfriend in the *Mad Men* narrative):

In fact, Betty evokes Jackie at the start of the episode as Don watches her descend the spiral staircase into the lobby of the Savoy to the strains of Rimsky-Korsakov's 'Song of India,' where they have made a Valentine Day's date for a romantic rendezvous alone in a room upstairs. Don's bride, Elizabeth 'Betty' Hofstadt Draper, is a Bryn Mawr graduate, a former fashion model who speaks fluent Italian, and an accomplished
equestrienne. She is never more Jackie than in 'Souvenir' (3:34) when she is away on a Roman holiday with Don who is on a business trip for Conrad Hilton. Betty becomes a vision of haute couture with her black fringe evening dress, beehive hairdo, and dangling earrings. Like JFK before him, Don Draper enhances his own cachet by also marrying well.

For his part, Don recalls an old American character who rises above his modest station in life by hard work and talent, charm and deception. Don Draper (nee Dick Whitman) is the archetypal self-made man hiding his hillbilly roots so he can succeed in business and assimilate seamlessly into the WASP establishment, not unlike the familial road traveled by the Irish Catholic Kennedy clan from impoverished immigrants to the White House in only five generations. Don and Betty Draper apparently live in a picture-perfect world. He is a hard-living advertising executive on the fast track to success. She is free to luxuriate her days away as a suburban princess. They have one girl, two boys, and live in Ossining, which is situated in wealthy Westchester County some thirty miles north of New York City. Ossining is also the home of celebrity broadcaster, Edward R. Murrow and John Cheever, the quintessential chronicler of the postwar suburban experience in America. Why then are the Drapers so unhappy? Why is their dream come true not enough?

Mad Men is currently one with the zeitgeist because it uses the language of myth — the conventions of the domestic and workplace melodrama — to represent the sorts of places where friends and relatives in the not-so-distant past lived and worked. The characters in Mad Men — who are basically stand-ins for our parents and grandparents — are hardly representative of a 'greatest' or silent and carefree generation. They are merely an earlier, confused, and conflicted version of us, trying to make the best of a future unfolding at breakneck speed. Contemporary audiences understand and relate to their disorientation. A preoccupation with the toll taken by the rat race and the stifling conformity of the suburbs no longer ignites the kinds of passions they once did. The new hot-button issues of today mostly cluster around questions of identity.

'Don is one thing on the inside and another thing on the outside,' explains Matt Weiner, 'I think that’s the American story' (KCRW). Where better to begin to make sense of yet another transformative moment like our own than in a narrative such as Mad Men where the characters are similarly caught between the recent past and a shadowy uncertain future.

Matt Weiner and his writing staff have selected three seminal episodes from the Kennedy presidency to catalyze the action and character development and bring them to a boiling point during each of the first three seasons of Mad Men. In season one, it's the twelfth episode, 'Nixon vs. Kennedy,' where all hell breaks loose as the younger employees at Sterling-Cooper let their hair down at an impromptu office party to ostensibly watch the election returns on television. The Sterling-Cooper crowd is solidly behind Dick Nixon except for the office weasel, Pete Campbell, who tries unsuccessfully to blackmail his boss Don Draper for a promotion upon accidently finding out that he's really Dick Whitman. Lucky for Draper, his own boss, Bertram Cooper, is an Ayn Rand
devotee who responds to Campbell's accusation by telling him: 'even if this were true, who cares? This country was built and run by men with worse stories than whatever you've imagined here.' For the time being at least, Don has dodged a bullet with his name on it. He has also followed JFK's lead by pushing his own doppelgänger named Dick as far into the background as possible.

The backdrop for the last episode of season two, 'Meditations in an Emergency,' is the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Apparently faced with the prospects of the world coming to an end, many of the key characters in Mad Men take the opportunity to act out of character. For example, Betty finds out she's pregnant and has a fling with a stranger in a bar; Don who was AWOL in California for three weeks, returns and writes a heartfelt letter of apology and love to Betty; Pete tells Peggy he thinks she's 'perfect' and wants to be with her, prompting Peggy to reveal to Pete that 'I had your baby and gave it away'; and the much larger British advertising agency, Putnam, Powell, and Lowe, acquires Sterling-Cooper, forcing Don to play the trump card that he's not under contract as his only way left of keeping his independence. Throughout season two, Don Draper proves that his first reaction to any kind of serious trouble at home or work is to run. In this way, Don is simply a more extreme version of what the philosopher George Santayana once observed about all Americans. He noted that they 'don't solve problems, they leave them behind. . . . If a situation bothers them, they leave it in the past' (Brooks 47).

The triple witching hour arrives for Mad Men in the penultimate episode of season three, 'The Grown Ups.' Don was finally forced to tell everything to Betty about his dual identity as Dick Whitman in 'The Gypsy and the Hobo' (3:37), catapulting the Drapers' already fragile marriage into uncharted territory between Halloween 1962 and November 22, 1963. Just like September 11, 2001, the Kennedy assassination is the 'caesura' that once again jumps starts the narrative to even greater heights of conflict and change. John Rossant, the European editor for BusinessWeek, wrote on the one-year anniversary of 9/11 that 'already that crystal-clear September morning is fast becoming an historical memory, the way some of us still remember a November day in 1963 when gunning down a young American president seemed to mark the end of one age and the beginning of another. We sense that history will divide into "before September 11" and "after."' In Covering the Body, Barbie Zelizer likewise identified the Kennedy assassination as a shared milestone for an earlier generation, reassessing how journalists had utilized that tragic event at the time to promote their own agendas and shape collective memory.

Matt Weiner also employs the Kennedy assassination — indeed the whole Kennedy presidency as well as the images of Jack and Jackie — to better understand the present and discover the future. The 'New Sentimentality' celebrated by Newman and Benton at the dawn of the Sixties, grew old by the Eighties and Nineties, and now is 'new' again in an albeit updated and reconfigured way. Just consider that 'Don Draper was voted as the No. 1 Most Influential Man of 2009 in a poll conducted by AskMen.com. And Don's not even a real person,' reports Katherine Stephen of The Christian Science Monitor. Yet another new and improved Kennedy reboot, Barack Obama, only ranked third in the
same poll. In the end, Weiner has appropriated JFK's style in modeling Don Draper. Like Kennedy before him, Draper's dedication to work gives his life a purpose it wouldn't have otherwise. Significantly, Don and his protege Peggy Olson respond to the Kennedy assassination by going to the office as the only way they can think of to cope with the tragedy.

Also like JFK, Don Draper shares in the 'New Sentimentality'; in the context of the Sixties, he like Kennedy is an outlier in his profession of choice. Don Draper literally pretends to be a part of the WASP establishment and its values, but he is a harbinger of the new emerging educated class of today, steeped in an alternative sensibility that is much more committed to meritocracy than nepotism (Roger Sterling) or social class (Pete Campbell). Don labours daily in the belly of the corporate beast, but it makes all the difference in the world that he is a creative director, not a director of accounts services (like Duck Phillips) or a chief financial officer (like Lane Pryce). Don blends the values of the Sixties counterculture with the aspirations of the ambitious, acquisitive Yuppie cultural backlash of a generation later. In short, Don Draper is a man of today. Now with Jack Kennedy gone for good from the Mad Men narrative, neither Don nor any of the other main characters in the series is likely to be quite the same as he or she was before. Matt Weiner is free again to tinker with and maybe even reinvent Don Draper/Dick Whitman for the Sixties, only this time sans Betty, Sterling-Cooper, and whatever remains of the 'Old Sentimentality.'

Gary R. Edgerton is Professor and Chair of the Communication and Theatre Arts Department at Old Dominion University. He has published eight books—most recently The Essential HBO Reader (University Press of Kentucky, 2008, with Jeffrey P. Jones) and The Columbia History of American Television (Columbia University Press, 2007)—more than seventy-five book chapters, journal articles, and encyclopedia entries on a wide assortment of media and culture topics, and is co-editor of the Journal of Popular Film and Television. He is currently editing an upcoming anthology for I.B. Tauris entitled, Reading Mad Men: Dream Come True TV.

User comments

Martha Nochimson on January 6, 2010

I am speaking as a critic who has had zero interest in Mad Men, despite my connections with Matt Weiner through my connections with David Chase and The Sopranos. However, this article threatens to lure me toward a second look. Thanks, Gary. This is the first analysis of weight and substance that I have read on the subject. The usual, in my experience, is emphasis on the brilliant, glossy surface of the series, in which, as I say above, I have no interest. I'd rather read Vogue for that. But your comparison of Don Draper/Dick Whitman (surely there is some interesting resonance in that last name considering your argument here) burrows down into the guts of the connection between Mad Men and American society. Thanks!