"THE STRONG, SILENT TYPE": TONY SOPRANO, DON DRAPER, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE WHITE MALE ANTIHERO IN CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION DRAMA

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I examine intertextuality present between The Sopranos and Mad Men, particularly in regards to each show’s protagonist. Tony Soprano and Don Draper are complex characters, each with their own conflicts, neuroses, and supporting characters, yet both men address a similar question: what does it mean to be a man in 21st century America? Both men deal with complex identities due to their pasts, exacerbated struggles due to their jobs, and most importantly, equally complex women who challenge their authority. While addressing issues of gender, I discuss the linkages present between each show’s creator, David Chase and Matthew Weiner, which speaks to the broader thematic overlap between the two dramas. Intertextuality, partially stemming from Weiner’s time in the Sopranos writing room under Chase, can help to interrogate television’s own auteur, the showrunner. I also analyze the white male antihero archetype as a whole, which has been popular on American television in the past fifteen years, as I trace the major conflicts to Robert Warshow’s formulation of the gangster as a tragic hero. For Warshow, though, the gangster ultimately worked as a straightforward morality tale – in these shows, the message of the antihero is deliberately muddled, crafting an intimate portrait of masculinity in crisis. Ultimately, Tony and Don fail to hold on to their past identities and masculinities in the face of their antiheroism, which may help to explain the appeal of the white male antihero archetype.
For Mom and Dad, who have always supported my passions.
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INTRODUCTION

In the search of similarities between different television shows, many theories have been utilized, including theories about genre, the culture industry, and hegemony. In this project, I will utilize a broad theory used in a specific way: intertextuality. As coined by Julia Kristeva, the term has gained widespread usage over nearly 50 years of academia, as scholars have attempted to learn the linkages between texts and how cultural perceptions of texts evolve. She defines intertextuality as the “transposition of one (or several) sign-system(s) into another,” given that the movement of meaning is “never single, complete and identical…but always plural, shattered, capable of being tabulated” (111). Using this definition, scholars of many fields have attempted to study how texts influence each other, suggesting that all texts are built off of other texts.

In the following chapters, I will be using intertextuality slightly differently than it is traditionally used. Strong individuals have always dominated television’s history, whether those individuals were stars like Lucille Ball or producers like Stephen J. Cannell. But in the 1990s, due to a complex confluence of market expansion, audience fragmentation, and new technologies, a new figure emerged: the showrunner. The unofficial title of showrunner usually indicates someone that holds multiple official roles, like writer, executive producer, and creator, and the showrunner makes final decisions regarding the direction of a series (Martin, Difficult Men 8-9). Combined with auteur theory, used heavily in film studies, I will utilize intertextuality to analyze the similarities and differences between the main characters and overall texts of The Sopranos and Mad Men. This may seem odd, as The Sopranos is about a gangster attempting to stave off attempts on his life, and Mad Men concerns an advertising executive in 1960s New York City. But the showrunner of Mad Men, Matthew Weiner, worked on The Sopranos for its
final two seasons, and through interviews and the texts themselves, it is clear that David Chase, who ran *The Sopranos*, had great influence on Weiner and his show.

When examining intertextuality between two television shows, the various sign-systems must be identified. In this case, the primary site of intertextuality is the protagonist, the white male antihero. This character brings specific images, conflicts, and supporting characters along with him, and that is why, with the antihero at its center, entire shows can seem similar. Furthermore, this definition allows for *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men*’s clear differences to stand out as well. Texts do not need to be identical to be intertextual, allowing for a wide range of interpretations and analyses of each show and each character.

Over the years, the term intertextuality has grown to be commonplace in academia, representing nearly as many definitions as there are intertextual analyses (Allen 2). As an example, structuralists typically utilize intertextuality in order to establish literary meaning, whereas poststructuralists use the term to disrupt it (Allen 4). In addition, other theorists have become closely studied along with intertextuality as well, further complicating the concept of a single idea behind intertextuality. Influences on Kristeva (like Ferdinand de Saussure and Mikhail Bakhtin) and her contemporaries (like Roland Barthes or Michael Riffaterre) have added their own linked theories that must be discussed briefly (Orr 20). For example, Gerard Genette’s work split Kristeva’s intertextuality into five subgroups and essentially renamed intertextuality as hypertextuality, a term that has become further obscured due to the popularity of the computer’s hypertext (Orr 106). While Genette’s definition of hypertextuality fits the aims of this project, for simplicity’s sake, I will use the term intertextuality, as the differences between the two as I will use them are small.
Related to intertextuality is Barthes’ ‘death of the Author,’ in that Barthes believes the singular Author, inputting his meaning into a text, has been replaced by a plurality of voices and meanings (Allen 68, 72). This would seem to be at odds with auteur theory, which relies heavily on the influence of one creator, but in television, the plurality of voices is clearly seen. While showrunners have the largest say in creative decisions, many people, from the actors to set designers, make up the text. Matthew Weiner, showrunner of Mad Men, utilizes time in episode commentaries to single out lesser-known crewmembers for their contributions to the series.

And, of course, The Sopranos is not the sole influence on Mad Men, and The Sopranos was not wholly a blast of originality—shows as varied as Twin Peaks, Hill Street Blues, and soap operas influenced David Chase in creating the show. Kristeva’s original definition of intertextuality relied on the understanding that the original author has read things before writing and that the reader had read other things before reading this text, so each side brings different viewpoints, both of which extend beyond the text itself (Still and Worton 1-2). Each show is made up of a variety of influences and voices, but the unique role of the showrunner in television, and the interesting linkage between these two specific showrunners, gives the opportunity for an intertextual exercise. And while The Sopranos is clearly an influential text, in this project, influence is different than intertextuality. Intertextuality moves beyond one genre “to aspire to the very meta-levels of intercultural reference itself,” whether it assumes the audience’s knowledge or not (Orr 91). A project on The Sopranos influencing Mad Men would limit the ways in which Mad Men has made specific choices in what to replicate, discard, and invent anew. In the words of Michael Baxandall, “To think in terms of influence blunts thought by impoverishing the means of differentiation” (Orr 83-4).
Lastly, it is important to note that intertextuality in most theoretical writing was established in relation to linguistics and literature but in recent years has been adapted to analyze film and television (Orr 20; Allen 174). Discussing intertextuality in television has been popular, particularly in the 1980s, but those articles will not be very useful here. For example, Naficy analyzes television through a randomly selected 39-minute “flow” from ABC in 1987, which included part of a soap opera, advertisements, and the first story in *20/20*. Due to the HBO’s ad-free model, *Mad Men*’s refusal to work in typical breaks for advertisements, and the various ways cable dramas have taken the mantle of “quality” on television, Raymond Williams’s concept of flow will not be particularly useful here (Nelson 14-5). Another article looks at how *Hill Street Blues* disrupts generic conventions, relying on a combination of soap and ensemble comedy plus cop procedural, which can only be explained by intertextuality (M. White 41-3). While *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* mix genres (and *Hill Street Blues* is an undoubtedly good starting place in analyzing contemporary television drama), this approach deemphasizes the individual and prioritizes the industry, which denies the rich interplay between showrunners.

Current work in television studies tends to regard intertextuality simply as references to or quotations of outside texts, which is different from Kristeva and Barthes’ original work and instead represents a “popularized amalgam” of the term (Orr 172). For example, “The Poetics and Rhetoric of The Wire’s Intertextuality” seems unwilling to engage with the thematic meaning of that show’s constant references to the western, and that point is only brought up in the final few pages of that article. David Lavery, who has edited three *Sopranos* essay collections and has written many articles on the show, has a section of his website devoted to cataloguing hundreds of “intertexts,” which amount to a list of references to American popular culture, literature, and other cultures. While this is important to study and within intertextuality’s broad
definition, this is not all the analytical framework of intertextuality can give. Simply put, there is more to do with intertextuality and television than a simple chart.

First, it will be worthwhile to discuss the importance of *The Sopranos*. Since its first season in 1998, the show has been well represented in academia, with critics focusing on the show’s cinematic qualities and how it represented a step forward for television, its treatment of violence, and the complicated family dynamics, particularly through its female characters. While *The Sopranos* was not the first TV show to be cinematic or use violence strategically, the confluence of these qualities, along with HBO’s freedom from advertising breaks or content restrictions, created a singular product. Most *Sopranos* essay collections begin with an essay establishing the show’s place near the forefront of television history, and collections on other shows often have a chapter comparing or contrasting the show to *The Sopranos* as well. For example, in *Interrogating The Shield*, an article establishing that show as Post-*Sopranos* says that current shows need to reckon with *The Sopranos* because it was “television worth taking seriously” (G. White 88). *The Sopranos* was also accepted outside of academia, with huge ratings and acceptance from New York’s Museum of Modern Art (Martin, *Difficult Men* 154). Still, fifteen years after its premiere, *The Sopranos* is widely seen as crucial to the current televisual landscape.

Matthew Weiner, for his part, has said *The Sopranos* is “the greatest TV show ever” (“Matthew Weiner Interview”). To him, “to see something that was good be financially successful was very important. To prove that the world was not filled with idiots” (“Matthew Weiner Interview”). Furthermore, he said:
The Sopranos is, to me, the first time since Roots that television completely exceeds the movies, that it really changed the entire idea of what the expectation was for television. And I think [it is] one of the great artistic achievements [and] changed the business model. I think it’ll always be seen as the groundbreaking moment in this…format, of the 13-episode mini-novel, with adult themes, subverted genre, [and] recognizable people. (“Matthew Weiner Interview”)

So, not only is The Sopranos a towering show in the media’s mind, but it also is a strong influence on Weiner himself. It makes sense, if Weiner adored the show so much, that he would want to emulate it on his own. But the specific similarities between the two shows lie more in the relationship between Weiner and his former boss, David Chase.

Chase was the showrunner of The Sopranos after having writing stints on The Rockford Files and Northern Exposure, which led to him vocally dislike television and the television business (Sepinwall, Revolution 32-3). Throughout Brett Martin’s Difficult Men, which gives accounts inside the writers’ room of significant television dramas since The Sopranos, Chase is described as a difficult and uncompromising boss who ran an autocratic room (161-3). Weiner, in a roundtable of current showrunners, said he learned to not take things a showrunner said in a writers’ room personally: “I’d be like, ‘Okay, okay, you don’t like that? Well, I’ve got something else. Did you actually say ‘Fuck you’ to me? Okay. Well, you don’t mean it’” (Martin, “Roundtable”). While Weiner did not specifically say that this was a story from the Sopranos room, it is not difficult to connect the dots, as Weiner rarely speaks of his time working on Becker. Weiner estimated Chase would rewrite about 90 percent of his scripts, indicating
Chase’s firm creative grasp on his show, something that Weiner has embraced in his own time as a showrunner (Martin, “Roundtable”).

And while Weiner has admitted that Mad Men would be “shit” without Chase’s mentorship while he was on The Sopranos writing staff, Weiner wrote the pilot before meeting Chase – it was actually what Weiner submitted to be considered to join the Sopranos staff (“Matthew Weiner Interview”; Itzkoff). And while Chase was a demanding boss – something Weiner later admits influenced the Mad Men episode “The Suitcase,” discussed in depth in Chapter 3 – he saw Weiner’s talent and recommended the Mad Men pilot as the show HBO should produce after The Sopranos (Martin, “Roundtable”; “Matthew Weiner Interview”). The story after this point is conflicted, but HBO did not pick up the pilot, and it passed to AMC, who specifically wanted to create a Sopranos-like series in order to rebrand their network as a destination for quality (Sepinwall, Revolution 309-10). Weiner shot the pilot during the hiatus built in to The Sopranos Season 6, and used much of the Sopranos crew to shoot it, including director Alan Taylor, who has shot nine episodes of The Sopranos (Sepinwall, Revolution 314-5). In the credits of the Mad Men pilot, Weiner thanks David Chase, presumably both for letting him shoot during the hiatus and for his mentorship. And, almost intentionally trying to take the place of The Sopranos in the public’s consciousness, Mad Men premiered only six weeks after the Sopranos finale.

At this point, it will be important to discuss structural similarities between the two shows. Both adhere to a format I’d like to refer to as similar to a collection of interconnected short stories, where each episode represents a single story in a character’s life, and by the end of the season, many of these stories converge and begin to make sense as a whole. Episodes usually include a story about the protagonist, but only focus on a few supporting characters out of a large
cast. For example, in *Mad Men* Season 1, episodes are usually structured around a theme, such as “Babylon,” which specifically looks at the various ways in which the women of the show are trapped in their situations, and “5G,” which gives a deeper look at Don Draper’s complicated past and identity. The pilot (in other seasons, the season premiere) sets certain plotlines into motion, such as hints at Don’s past identity and Peggy Olson and Pete Campbell having sex. All of these plots come to some sort of fruition by the season finale, as Peggy gives birth, Don learns his brother has committed suicide, and the women displayed in “Babylon” begin to find ways to break out of their circumstances.

This approach is different than other shows such as *The Wire* and *Game of Thrones* that are intentionally novelistic, which set up a number of plots in the season premiere, follow these plots in each episode, and follow all of those plots to their conclusion in the penultimate episode, leaving the finale for denouement. *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* set up plots but follow them erratically – for example, while Peggy is crucial to the first two episodes of the series, she then does not have another spotlight until “Babylon,” episode six, as other characters get more attention, and during these episodes, her plots are primarily ignored. This also differs from procedural shows – while Don often has a client to impress in each episode, many conflicts are left unresolved at the end of each episode, leading to the show’s serialized nature. This is reflected in the writing process for each show – the showrunner typically comes in and has an arc for the season planned out, and then the room breaks individual episodes, with the showrunner rewriting most of the scripts for these episodes into their final versions (“Matthew Weiner Interview”). Chase and Weiner place specific meaning in the television episode as a single unit, unlike *The Wire*, where individual episodes only make sense as part of a season and the series as a whole.
While *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* are similar, and the men at their center are also alike, they have their differences. Weiner has done a commentary on every episode of *Mad Men* for home video releases and frequently will do interviews to discuss his show, including his specific meaning in crafting a scene a certain way. Chase does far fewer interviews and has been loath to explain his intentions or meaning, especially regarding the series finale, which will be discussed in Chapter 1 (Sepinwall, *Revolution* 52). Responding to a question in regards to his own talkativeness, Weiner said, “David would never do this stuff. Never ever ever” (“Matthew Weiner Interview”). And, drawing on his time on *The Rockford Files* and *Northern Exposure*, Chase has openly discussed his disdain of television, an opinion which has not changed after creating one of the best-regarded shows of all-time (Martin, *Difficult Men* 34). A lover of the French New Wave, Chase has always wanted to make movies, and after *The Sopranos*, he wrote and directed his first film, *Not Fade Away*, and he says he has no plans to return to the medium that made him famous. Chase’s attitude is reflected in his show, which openly attempts to subvert television conventions and was very self-consciously cinematic. Weiner, on the other hand, says, “I love television, I love watching television, I love being a part of it. And it’s very different from movies” (Molloy). Weiner, in interviews, references shows from television’s past and present, revealing how different he is from his mentor in this respect. Despite this major difference, it is surprising how similar these two shows end up being.

One final aspect of the relationship between the two men is each of their egos, which both have talked about as being key to their personalities (Martin, “Roundtable”). Weiner proudly says that the two of them are friends now, when they were not when Chase was his boss: “We’re all looking for approval. It matters to me that he likes the show. It really does” (“Matthew Weiner Interview”). In the same interview, Weiner speculated about Chase’s reaction
to *Mad Men*, saying, “It’s gotta be complicated to see me succeed,” indicating the degree to which Weiner attempts to psychoanalyze his ex-boss, since Chase presumably takes some responsibility for Weiner as a writer (“Matthew Weiner Interview”). Now, their relationship seems to be strong – Weiner says he calls Chase while writing in order to work out of jams, and that “No one else…understands what this is like” (“Matthew Weiner Interview”). Weiner wants to succeed in order to please Chase, stemming from their difficult time working together, something that Weiner admits is often present in his writing (Martin, “Roundtable”). Clearly, the relationship between the two men has been complex over the years, and since these two projects are so closely linked in showrunner, crew, and thematic content, it will be instructive to see the various points at which intertextuality will help to discuss these two shows.

My first chapter will utilize Robert Warshow’s formulation of the American gangster as tragic hero as a starting point for discussion. Warshow’s essay has influenced studies on the gangster since its publication, and Tony Soprano seems a natural point of comparison. And while Tony represents many of the same American contradictions that Warshow discusses, the series finale complicates the gangster’s tragic end, as the inherent moral lessons in death no longer apply. This will act as a jumping-off point for a discussion of antiheroes, which have been embedded in the American consciousness for far longer than 1999, and specifically how Don Draper works as an antihero if he does not murder and physically threaten people like Tony does. This chapter will set groundwork for Chapters 2 and 3, as Tony and Don’s antiheroism impacts everything else they do and everyone else they meet.

My second chapter will address the other two-thirds of the phrase “white male antihero”: white males. These two shows are in conversation together regarding what it means to be a white male in the 21st century, as the shows paint a picture between Don’s privilege as the show
begins, Don’s loss of privilege as the show ends, and Tony’s longing for “the strong, silent type” of man, which is far gone by his era. For both characters, their masculinity is perpetually in question and needs to be proved at all times, which is exacerbated by the unique premises of their shows, whether it’s a mob boss dealing with threats from the outside, panic attacks, and his own family, or a man who essentially gets to recreate himself into the perfect hegemonic man following a tragic accident in his past. *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* portray masculinity as complex and in conflict, and ultimately, something that is impossible to keep for long.

My third chapter will address another aspect of the premise of each show: how the antihero attempts to negotiate the women in his life. While the antihero attempts to act hegemonically, which often includes adultery, these women complicate his life by introducing conflicts that he cannot solve by his antiheroic standards he uses in his work life. Other scholars have studied many of these women, but I will focus on one platonic relationship each antihero has with a woman. This relationship tends to humanize the antihero further and focus on his deep individualism and intellectualism, and the antihero often learns through his conflicts with these characters. Tony’s platonic relationship is with Dr. Melfi and Don’s is with Peggy, the latter of which is best explored through the episode “The Suitcase,” which nicely illustrates the conflict between the antihero, his sexual desires, and his need for success. Furthermore, this episode can be read as a representation of the conflict between Chase and Weiner in the writers’ room, an interpretation that Weiner himself lends some credence to.

In this project, I hope to not only explore the intertextuality between *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* but also ponder the meaning of the popularity of the white male antihero in American cable drama. However, not all antihero dramas are created equal – *Breaking Bad*, for example, follows Warshow’s gangster through his demise, whereas *The Sopranos* rebels against that kind
of ending, which may explain the positive reaction to *Breaking Bad*’s conclusion with fans compared to *The Sopranos*’s. And while Walter White struggled with masculinity, something the first season especially focuses on, Walt does not have a platonic relationship with another woman in his life. While this reinforces the specific intertextuality between *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men*, it shows that the white male antihero may be the only constant in the many antihero dramas that have followed *The Sopranos* throughout the early 21st century.

And antiheroes are an important figure, as they act as sites to criticize the current inadequacies in American life. Cable dramas have been a popular site for quality programming on television, and the white male antihero has been dominating cable and premium channels for 15 years. Between David Chase and Matthew Weiner, the two men have made a lasting impact on American television, and their two series – and the men who lead them – are fascinating entry points into television and American life in the 21st century.
CHAPTER I: THE GANGSTER AS TRAGIC ANTIHERO

In the Season 3 episode “Proshai, Livushka,” Tony Soprano sits alone and watches his favorite movie: *The Public Enemy*. He sips at some liquor and smiles as he watches the opening credits, particularly when James Cagney’s character Tom Powers pops up on the screen. As the first ten minutes of the episode shows, this has been a pretty typical day – we’ve seen him bicker with his mother, hurl racial slurs towards his daughter’s boyfriend, and suffer a panic attack, which isn’t uncommon for Tony. He steps outside to smoke, and when he reenters, his family has gathered to tell him something: his mother, Livia, has died.

The bulk of the episode deals with Tony’s friends and family sending their condolences and the various ways the mobsters deal with grief, climaxing in a dysfunctional funeral. (The non-dysfunctional parts of the funeral also act as a sendoff to Nancy Marchand, who played Livia and died suddenly during production of the third season.) The episode ends on a quiet scene: Tony alone, drinking, watching the ending of *The Public Enemy*. In the film, Tom has been in the hospital, and a phone call informs his mother that Tom is coming home soon. As she gleefully prepares a bed for her son upstairs, the doorbell rings downstairs – it is Tom, tied-up and murdered. For the nearly two minutes of this scene, the camera cuts back and forth between Tony’s TV and Tom’s face. Tony’s face is still until the final shot of the episode, where he begins to tear up, and the screen fades to black.

Even for a show like *The Sopranos*, which is littered with references to popular culture, and gangster movies in particular, *The Public Enemy*’s prominence in this important episode in the show’s run stands out. The film is an example of the Hollywood gangster films that were popular during the studio system’s domination of the industry, popularly analyzed in 1948 by Robert Warshow in his frequently anthologized “The Gangster as Tragic Hero.” (The gangster is
also discussed as a reference point in his later essay “Movie Chronicle: The Westerner.”) It is not a stretch to say that Tony Soprano fits into Warshow’s formulation of the gangster, but both the character of Tony Soprano and “Proshai, Livushka” illuminate the ways that *The Sopranos* subtly tweaks the movie gangster of old, paving the way for the complex cable drama antiheroes (like Don Draper) of the day. As discussed in my introduction, the intertextuality between *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* can be used to examine why these shows have connected with the American populace and what they say about the people, and the society, that watches them.

Perhaps the best place to begin the linkage between Warshow’s gangster and Tony is at the end of their stories. Warshow says that the gangster story is fundamentally a tragedy, and that “We are not permitted to ask whether at some point he could have chosen to be something else than what he is” (101). He says that while the story begins with the audience’s understanding that men can succeed or fail, the gangster’s story can only end with the ultimate failure, death. Indeed, Warshow postulates the audience’s pleasure with the gangster film lies in our response to sadism – we enjoy both vicariously participating in the debauchery of crime and “then seeing it turned against the gangster himself” (102).

For six seasons, viewers enjoyed the acts of violence Tony and his Mafia family committed, but famously, the audience did not get the catharsis of seeing the gangster dead at the end, a la *The Public Enemy* – the audience didn’t get to see much at all. In the series’ final episode, “Made in America,” hints of Tony’s death are made throughout the hour, but a smash cut to black deprived viewers of either the relief of seeing the man in the Members Only jacket gunning down Tony or seeing Meadow Soprano, his daughter, walk in through the door after having a tough time parallel parking – there is very purposefully no closure, no “double satisfaction” (101).
David Chase’s refusal to give an unambiguous ending to Tony Soprano’s story was not a cop out, as some fans claimed at the time – it reflects the gangster’s new place in popular culture. Warshow begins his essay by saying America “is committed to a cheerful view of life. It could not be otherwise,” and the “gangster speaks for us, expressing that part of the American psyche which rejects the qualities and the demands of modern life” (97, 100). For Warshow, the gangster’s tragic demise gives the audience comfort so that they can easily continue in their lives, knowing that success is fleeting and that the gangster was punished. By actively disallowing this satisfaction, The Sopranos not only subverts the traditional gangster genre but also defies television’s expectations of closure, particularly in a series finale. Chase, in an interview with Entertainment Weekly shortly after the conclusion of the series, said, “The way I see it is that Tony Soprano had been people’s alter ego. They had gleefully watched him rob, kill, pillage, lie, and cheat. They had cheered him on. And then, all of a sudden, they wanted to see him punished for all that. They wanted ’justice.’ They wanted to see his brains splattered on the wall. I thought that was disgusting, frankly.” Chase understands part of the linkage between Tony and the viewers, but he makes clear that the traditions of the gangster narrative didn’t apply to Tony's story, in his mind, despite audience expectations. Tony Soprano didn’t die at the end of “Made in America” because that was not the most important death of the episode. The death was not Tony Soprano, the human being – it was Tony Soprano, the character, and the death of his presence on our televisions. Even as Warshow still pegs the audience’s need for the gangster story, the gangster’s essential conclusion has shifted into something more nebulous. It is fitting that the series finale is called “Made in America” – Tony Soprano was made in America, but more importantly, American society is responsible for his success and the lasting cultural influence of the gangster.
Of course, The Sopranos was not reacting on its own to The Public Enemy – the show is just another in a long line of takes on the gangster, and plenty of films have innovated in the nearly seventy years between those two texts. The Godfather trilogy is probably the most significant gangster text post-Warshow, both because of its enduring popularity and rapturous critical attention, but Martin Scorsese’s Goodfellas also represents a significant step forward for the genre. The Godfather looks at many aspects of the gangster’s life but does so wistfully; Goodfellas emphasizes the violent and destructive nature of the gangster. But the key here is not that The Godfather and Goodfellas have influenced The Sopranos in our world (even though they certainly have) – but rather that these two films, in particular, have influenced Tony and the Mafia. Throughout the series, these texts are referenced constantly, including spot-on impersonations and quotes by Silvio Dante and Bobby Baccalieri. These characters are fascinated by popular culture. This marks a shift from gangster films from Warshow’s era, where embracing film and other popular texts was often marked as effeminate (Auster 11). There are echoes within the creation of the show as well, of course – in the Season 1 finale, Tony is shot at after buying orange juice, an echo of the famous scene in The Godfather where Don Corleone buys oranges just before being shot. But Tony lives in a world where the public’s perception of gangsters has been heavily influenced by American popular culture’s fascination with the gangster, and this reflects on those characters as well. Tony is acutely aware of those films, and thus he is aware of the kinds of behavior associated with gangster movies, as well as the typical fate of a movie gangster. Consequently, this intertextuality goes further. It influences the lives of each character within the world and not just the general themes and plotting of the text, giving The Sopranos a different look at the gangster narrative – especially since these differences are built over 86 episodes and nine years, not just two hours in a single afternoon.
Some have claimed that *The Sopranos*’ differences from the typical gangster narrative is due to genre hybridity – specifically, the introduction of soap opera elements (or, more simply, a distinctive feminine point of view). Akass and McCabe explain that introducing the soap opera is particularly unique because the gangster genre is typically hostile towards women, and placing Tony in unfamiliar settings and situations fuels quite a bit of the show’s drama (qtd. in Nelson 27). For example, throughout the series, Tony’s scenes with Jennifer Melfi, his psychiatrist, are often a proving ground for Tony’s machismo, setting aside significant chunks of time simply to two characters talking about their feelings and Melfi’s psychoanalytical proddings. This represents a different type of character at the show’s helm, further underlined because a Tony and Melfi scene begins the series.

“Proshai, Livushka” represents this dynamic quite well. It doesn’t have a plotline that explicitly deals with the Mafia or violence, and the only death is Livia’s, off-screen. (While the show typically does have at least one Mob plotline in each episode, they often pale in comparison to the screentime of the character drama that forms the heart of the show.) The bulk of the episode is watching the characters deal with grief and intake various substances to help them get through the day, whether it be drugs, alcohol, or popular culture. Tellingly, the show’s penultimate episode sets up the possibility of a massive war between Tony and Phil Leotardo, but the series finale dismisses that idea quickly. After securing the safety of the main characters, Phil is dispatched, in the episode’s only death. The rest of the episode is committed to tying up character loose ends (such as Paulie’s being unnerved by a cat that stares all day at a picture of Christopher Moltisanti, who recently had died) and concluding some of the family drama instead of giving much running time to typical gangster activities.
Part of this shift also has to do with *The Sopranos* being a self-consciously cinematic television show. Television before *The Sopranos* had been shot on film, and television had also attracted *auteurs*, most notably David Lynch. But David Chase, after working in the television industry for years, actively despised the industry and wanted to create a cinematic television show. He only has spoken favorably about a few programs—*The Larry Sanders Show*, *Twin Peaks*, and *Miami Vice*, being a few—and his comments about the industry are openly hostile. He told *LA Weekly*, “I don’t think much about television at all…Nobody really concentrates very much on sweeping you away, by your senses. I wanted to do a show in which the senses were engaged, the visual sense and the audio sense” (Polan 87). This sensibility, combined with HBO’s lack of restrictions on language and nudity, and commercial breaks, led to an extremely cinematic experience.

But the moral content of *The Sopranos*, which is in large part crystallized into Tony’s character, also differs from typical televisual content. Martha P. Nochimson traces this shift back to the Production Code Administration, “Which stipulated that a film must *never* permit the audience to sympathise with or admire a character with questionable or negative morals” (“Televisuality”). While Tony does plenty of terrible things throughout the course of the series, including murder (beginning in the fifth episode of the series, “College”), the audience can sympathize with him, partly due to the deep looks into the psyche the Melfi sessions and the explorations of his home life give us. Warshow says that the gangster “Is what we want to be and what we are afraid we may become” (101), so by these deeper examinations into Tony’s mind, we discover more about ourselves. The gangster story is no longer a simple morality play—because it is cinematic television of a hybrid genre, it is a complex series with many factors at play.
Examining the show’s innovations as a whole are important to understanding its protagonist. The gangster – and Tony Soprano – fit into the white male antihero archetype. Partly due to the success of *The Sopranos*, these kinds of characters have taken over television cable drama, from Walter White on *Breaking Bad* to Dexter Morgan on *Dexter*. Antiheroes have existed in literature for centuries, of course, and television has had its share of antiheroes prior to 1998. But since Tony Soprano and the show became a cash cow (and awards hog) for HBO, television has been trying to repeat this formula ever since. As Matthew Weiner put the appeal of the antihero in a roundtable with Vince Gilligan, showrunner of *Breaking Bad*, and David Milch, showrunner of *Deadwood*:

> I think we’ve always been a subversive culture—poking at authority, being a gangster, breaking the rules. That’s Antihero America. At the same time, there’s a lot of guilt and shame that goes along with our basically criminal mentality…So when a character like Tony Soprano comes along, you’re saying, “This is a real criminal. I wish I could be that way. I really do.” And at the same time: “I hope something bad happens to him, because it’s probably wrong to feel that way.” (Martin, “Roundtable”)

This tension is at the heart of the antihero – audiences desire the wish-fulfillment of seeing a protagonist take what he wants, but also need moral superiority over the antihero. Whether he knew it or not, Weiner is repeating one of Warshow’s central points, discussed earlier. Similarities like this allow us to discuss the antihero as a formulation of the gangster as tragic hero – in this case, the tragic white male antihero.
One key aspect of the white male antihero is his individual spirit. Warshow says “The gangster’s whole life is an effort to assert himself as an individual, to draw himself out of the crowd...even to himself, he is a creature of the imagination” (103). In death or in life, the gangster separates himself from others to become something more than just another man (103). This is not particularly distinctive in American television drama – audiences may have a hard time rooting for a character who blends into the crowd and always seeks to uphold the status quo. But the emphasis on the importance of the individuality of the protagonist is key to the white male antihero – he stands out of the crowd due to his antiheroic actions, in part, but also due to the enhanced emphasis on his mind. Tony, while he murders, cheats on his wife, and destroys the lives of others, does not stand out in his circle of life due to these attributes. As Warshow states, the gangster’s “activity becomes a kind of pure criminality: he hurts people” (101). Rather, Tony stands out because of his intense individualism, against the various problems he finds against American society, and his attempts at introspection with Melfi. (Much of the drama during Season 1 comes from the idea that if anybody found out Tony was seeing a psychiatrist, they would try and have him replaced, so he was undertaking these sessions with his life at risk.) Robin Nelson, in examining so-called “high-end” TV drama, says the show’s focus on Tony’s psyche is deeper than in any other gangster, and that this psychological element takes the character and genre into new territory (28).

It is here that I would like to introduce Mad Men into the conversation. This show is very different from The Sopranos on the surface – most pertinent to this discussion is that it has no gangsters. Yet I would argue that, through intertextuality between the two, the shows occupy a similar cultural space, which is best seen through its central characters. There is no question that Don Draper is a white male antihero – he is privileged in the 1960s due to his race and gender,
and he constantly cheats on his wife, is self-destructive, and is prone to attacks of emotional violence on those he’s close to. But more interestingly, Don keeps many of the qualities of the gangster as tragic hero, and these characteristics are part of what makes him a fascinating protagonist. The intertextuality between the two shows goes deeper than the culture industry simply reproducing itself in search of another hit – the shows, and characters, are in conversation with one another. As Reader points out, while *auteur* theory is necessarily a kind of study in intertextuality, and has been applied to American Hollywood directors since the 1950s, the same approach in other popular media is less common, especially for the advertiser-driven medium of television. (The rise of the showrunner, television’s own *auteur*, may be the cause for this shift in analysis, as I discussed in my introduction.)

Much like Tony, the best place to begin with Don may be his end. Unfortunately, *Mad Men* still has one season (split over two years, much like *The Sopranos*) remaining, so we cannot know with certainty how Matthew Weiner will leave Don Draper. But the start of each episode may be an effective clue – the title sequence shows an animated version of Don falling out of his office in a skyscraper, dreamily falling past the advertisements that he creates. Originally, Weiner wanted the title sequence to be similar, but not animated, featuring Jon Hamm throwing himself out of his office window, but AMC sought a compromise. This is not to say that Don will definitely die at the end of the series, but that the concern is still present – will Don be punished for all of the immoral things he does during the course of the show? Furthermore, genre hybridity is also important in analyzing Don – the show is a mix between a procedural workplace drama (where a client would demand an advertising campaign each episode, and Don and his team would deliver) and a soap opera, where entanglements (romantic and otherwise) between the characters are the focus. Much like *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men* over time has strayed from this
formula – some episodes forgo any specific advertising plot at all, leaving the soapier elements of the show to dominate.

One more of Warshow’s characteristics of the gangster should be brought up: the importance of the city. The city is dangerous to the gangster because of its anonymity, which culminates in the gangster’s death. But during life, the gangster stands out of the city and rises above – keeping one’s individuality in the city is one way the gangster measures success. Tellingly, the title sequence of *The Sopranos* is of Tony leaving the city, of driving past the signs of failed industry and into the suburbs. Tony openly dislikes traveling into New York City. There, he is just another mobster, and the profits from his crime empire are dwarfed by that of the New York families. Setting in *The Sopranos* is key – by shooting on-location in New Jersey for exteriors, the show does not just not use a city as its setting – the lack of a city is central to its setting. (This is especially crucial considering how many shows are set in a nondescript city, such as Vancouver, New York City, or Los Angeles, which can either be itself or stand in for other places.) The show is very consciously not just about the operatic, violent moments in a gangster’s life, but also about the quieter, domestic moments, symbolized by the suburbs.

*Mad Men*’s setting it also key to unlocking its main character. As already discussed, *Mad Men*’s title sequence shows Don prominently featured in the city, but the show paints a complex picture – Don is torn between the country, where his home life is, and the city, where his job (and, frequently, his mistresses) reside. Once Don gets divorced from his wife Betty at the end of Season 3, he moves to the city, where his self-destructive tendencies take him over for Season 4. Earlier in Don’s life, as the viewer learns through flashbacks, Don stole another man’s identity in order to escape from his sordid childhood – he moved to the city in order to blend in away from his hometown. For Don, the city is anonymity, and once the show’s narrative begins with the
pilot, he is beginning to turn into a tragic figure – he is becoming more of an individual and more introspective. Don once came to the city to become anonymous, but as we see in the show, he fights against it.

Don fits into the gangster narrative not because he is a gangster in any sense, but because he is a product of the intertextuality between Mad Men and The Sopranos. He is another character who theoretically should be on top of the world – after all, he is a hotshot advertising executive in the 1960s, and he is white, straight, and handsome. Yet he is not. His past, along with his present insecurities, drag him down. (As of the end of Season 6, he has lost his job, his daughter’s affection, and possibly his wife.) Warshow says that “In the end, it is the gangster’s weakness as much as his power and freedom that appeals to us; the world is not ours, but it is not his either” (107), and by seeing him fail, this releases us of our burden to constantly succeed. These characters act as a counterbalance to American hegemony – to quote Warshow one last time, “…more generally he appeals to that side of all of us which refuses to believe in the ‘normal’ possibilities of happiness and achievement; the gangster is the ‘no’ to that great American ‘yes’ which is stamped so big over our official culture and yet has so little to do with the way we really feel about our lives” (106). That difference between appearance and reality is at the heart of the white male antihero since he begins in our minds as a privileged character. His humanization must occur through other, sometimes psychological, means, something which The Sopranos and Mad Men excel at, through different approaches.

But what of the refusal to kill Tony Soprano, or the possibility that Don lives past 1970, the supposed end date for Mad Men? The power of the classical gangster story came in its conclusion – the gangster, finally dead, paying for all of his sins but releasing us, as well. I propose that these characters are not just playing the “gangster as tragic hero” role anymore –
they are playing a slightly altered one, the gangster as tragic antihero. “Tragic antihero” may seem a contradiction in terms, but it works well in practice. With a long-running drama series, which both of these shows are (with 178 episodes between them), viewers can see more aspects of a character’s life than in a two-hour movie. They can see the character change over time, as both progress at something approximating real time. (This is opposed to *Breaking Bad*, which compressed most of its six years of airing into the span of about a year of story.) Spending more time with a character does not instantly mean the audience is going to be more sympathetic towards them, but with these shows, the immoral things they do can be reckoned with and explained in context. Perhaps this has something to do with the quality of acting – James Gandolfini won three Emmys for his performance, and Jon Hamm has been nominated every year the show has been eligible thus far (six times). The importance of the showrunner is also key – David Chase and Matthew Weiner lead their writing rooms and have had final editing privileges on all of the scripts for their respective shows, so presumably their vision for the character arc of the protagonist is being adequately fulfilled. The tweak to Warshow’s formulation of the tragic hero is subtle – it could be argued that an antihero is inherently tragic, since his weaknesses are so visible. But while the tragic antihero’s violence, misogyny, and ugliness may be on full display, his introspection usually is as well, and that helps to make the white male antihero palatable to a wide audience.

Perhaps there is a better way to sum up the gangster’s end in *The Sopranos* than its final scene – its penultimate scene. In it, Tony goes to see Uncle Junior, who shot him in the Season 6 premiere, “Members Only.” They have not spoken since, and despite protestations from his family, until now Tony had never been to see Junior in his nursing home. The first season began with Junior as Tony’s enemy, and while Tony caught a break and avoided a war when Junior was
sent to prison, in Season 6 Junior has lost most of his memory. In the scene, Tony comes to tell Junior about a trust set up in the name of Bobby Baccalieri’s kids, but it becomes clear that Junior will not remember this information. Tony realizes that Junior doesn’t even recognize him, despite being the cause of Junior’s confinement to the nursing home. Tony, trying to spark a flame in Junior, asks him about the old days, and says, “You and my dad…you two ran North Jersey.” After a moment, Junior smiles and replies, “That’s nice.” He then looks out of the window, towards some birds perched on a tree. Tony, realizing Junior has probably already forgotten he’s there, leaves quickly, tears beginning to well. The scene lasts less than three minutes, but its positioning before the final, anticlimactic scene is intentional. It positions the gangster not as going out in a blaze of glory, but as dying out slowly over time, not even able to take care of himself. No matter what interpretation one has of the final scene, this penultimate scene makes clear how *The Sopranos* tweaked Warshow’s gangster.
CHAPTER II: HEGEMONIC WHITE MASCULINITY AS CONTRADICTION

Before the audience sees a second of Don Draper, the pilot of Mad Men helpfully states exactly what a Mad Man is: “MAD MEN: A term coined in the late 1950's to describe the advertising executives of Madison Avenue.” After a moment, another sentence pops up underneath: “They coined it” (“Smoke Gets In Your Eyes”). It is no coincidence that the word “men” is in the title of this show – it is a show intimately concerned with both the gender politics of the time and our reaction to them in the present day. While Mad Men has a number of female characters – whom I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 3 – everything orbits around the titular men. Corresponding with the realities of advertising in the early 1960s, all of the significant Mad Men are white. Of course, this is not much of a surprise, as the decaying privilege of its main characters as the 60s wear on is a key theme of the show.

But of the antihero shows set in modern times, all of the protagonists are white men as well. From Tony Soprano to Vic Mackey on The Shield, from Walter White on Breaking Bad to Dexter Morgan on Dexter, a specific look is expected for the protagonist. Thus, for the protagonists of these shows, just being an antihero is not the key: being a white male is also integral to the character. In particular, these characters often yearn for a specific kind of white masculinity, one that reaches back to the days depicted in Mad Men's pilot. Here, men are undisputed rulers, able to sexually objectify a new employee before she even walks into the office. Don's fall from preeminence is a primary theme on Mad Men, but the concern is also present throughout the run of The Sopranos, beginning with Tony's remark to Melfi in the pilot about the world losing “the strong, silent type” of man personified by Gary Cooper. Although Tony and Don are very different physically, both characters have to actively perform and assert their masculinity in order to be successful, in their workplace and home life. In many ways,
asserting masculine fronts are main conflicts for both characters, dominating plots across seasons. This deliberation over masculinity is not just present to make a contrast between the past and the present – both Don and Tony are reflections of the modern man, unsure of what the ever-changing definition of “good” masculinity entails. In their struggles to perform masculinity correctly, we can see the shifting role of the American man over the past 50 years. Intertextuality helps as a prism to view the many ways in which these characters are similar, and a few important ways in which they are not. These characters are learning to negotiate posthegemonic formations of white masculinity, and they typically fail in ways that question their identities and facilitate their antiheroism.

It is important to note that the prevailing academic thought around the time that *The Sopranos* premiered was that masculinity in America was undergoing a drastic shift (Vavrus 352-3). The popular term in the media was “masculinity in crisis,” and the discourse was clear: the position of men in society is changing, which can cause other changes as a reaction (Carroll 2). Some television representations were beginning to catch up to the shifting cultural politics in the wake of feminism, particularly regarding the man’s no longer undisputed role as head of the family unit. Academia had also picked up on this around the same time – much ink was spilled, particularly using the terminology “hegemonic masculinity,” which has continued to be popular into the present (Connell & Messerschmidt 830). While this term has its problems and detractors, it has been influenced by a variety of fields and disciplines, becoming “a widely used framework for research and debate about men and masculinities” (835).

Statistically, completely performing hegemonic masculinity is not common, but the concept is still influential in that the vast percentage of the population is judged against these ideals (Connell & Messerschmidt 832). And yet the ideal is not singular, as was originally
theorized before the twentieth century – there are “a plurality of masculinities, each culturally specific,” which also takes into account historical eras and class status (Norman 966). The interesting thing in situating Mad Men and The Sopranos together, due to their intertextuality, is that hegemonic masculinity is under critique from multiple angles. While Mad Men is set in the 1960s, Weiner is looking back on the era with a Chase-like, present day cynicism. Thus, the brand of masculinity under interrogation is American, white, and of the early 2000s.

In Michael S. Kimmel’s overview of the history of masculinity in America, he identifies two initial primary conceptions of masculinity: the Gentle Patriarch and the Heroic Artisan. But a third kind emerges due to the Industrial Revolution, which quickly becomes the primary form of masculinity in America: Marketplace Manhood (Kimmel 38). Marketplace Manhood identifies manliness as deriving from economic success, and while it appears that both Tony and Don would be well-served by this definition, they are ultimately trapped by it. Because economic markets are inherently fragile – displayed by Tony and Carmela’s constant bickering over money and Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce’s struggles over keeping clients – their identities are constantly in flux. Therefore, “masculinity becomes something that constantly needs to be proved and is seemingly in constant danger of being lost” (Norman 967). Thus, Tony cannot just quit the mob after gaining a certain amount of money – he is stuck in his situation. He must continue providing, always seeking more, in order to prove his masculinity to both himself and his family. This ties into the next common characteristic of masculinity: dominance, particularly as it is tied to capitalism. Norman goes as far as to say, “the respective hierarchies of masculinity and capitalism may be different facets of the same system of domination” (968). It is no coincidence that both Tony and Don’s jobs are inherently capitalist. Don makes this clear in the pilot, when he tells a woman who claims she’s never fallen in love, “What you call love was
invented by guys like me to sell nylons,” and he always believes in the power and importance of advertising (“Smoke Gets In Your Eyes”). As discussed in my first chapter, the gangster genre is in part a capitalist fantasy, and Tony is similarly convinced that he is simply being a good capitalist.

Dominance is not enough – to sate the masculine man’s quest for identity and money, he must be aggressive as well (Norman 968). This manifests itself in obvious ways, such as physical strength, and more subtle ones, such as aggression in interpersonal conflicts. Both men are physically strong enough to be identified as masculine, and both resort to intimidation and institutional power to resolve conflicts. The corollary to dominance and aggression is that the hegemonic man must always keep his feelings in check in order to appear aggressive and dominant to others (Norman 970-1). This, of course, supposes that being in touch with emotions is inherently feminine, and this is what much of The Sopranos’s premise is situated on – how can a wise guy go to a psychiatrist? (A female psychiatrist, no less?) Don has similar troubles, even if they’re not as acutely situated in the show’s premise. Most famously, in the episode “The Suitcase,” he attempts to hide his feelings over the death of a friend from his protégé Peggy Olson, until he breaks down in the final minutes of the episode. Clearly, these concerns are still embedded in the hegemonic man of today, which these two series are constantly grappling with.

It is important to note that neither Tony nor Don is practicing what some call sensitive masculinity or soft masculinity, such as many of the men in the ABC drama thirtysomething. The 1980s saw the reemergence of strong hegemonic masculinity – seen in The A-Team – and the popularization of sensitive masculinity on television, where characters are validated for expressing their feelings and are non-violent to a fault (MacKinnon 70-1). This clearly does not describe Tony or Don. The tragic white male antihero always has the potential for violence,
whether physical or emotional. So while Tony speaks honestly to Melfi about his feelings, he also threatens her, touches her, and wrecks her office more than a few times. Simply put, these characters are more complex than the archetypical man, although this complexity has begat another oft-repeated archetype.

In this chapter, I will use the term “white masculinity” or “white male” as a single unit. This does not reflect that their whiteness is not important or not significant enough to merit its own chapter – rather, I believe that in this case, race and gender are tied too closely to separate entirely, and thus, both should be tackled simultaneously. Don is not just in power because he is white, or because he is a man – specifically, he gains his power from being a white man during a time period that prioritizes white men. And while Tony’s story begins nearly 40 years later, he still shares many of Don’s attitudes regarding women and other races, a reflection of both his upbringing and his business. Scholars have questioned the usefulness of the term “hegemonic masculinity” in discussing power if questions of race are entirely ignored, so a more specific term is often useful (Connell & Messerschmidt 831). “White masculinity” as a specific term is also rooted in history – in discussing the wilderness novel, which highly influenced ideals of American masculinity, Norman says, “the idealized masculine type is always white” (971). Thus, Tony and Don are not just searching for the right masculine cards to play – they are attempting to perform a specific kind of white masculinity, one that has deep roots in immense privilege.

At the same time, white masculinity has undergone significant changes recently as well. Being a white man is no longer the simple norm against which other races and genders are judged against – this ignores the “complex process of maintenance as the pressures against which privilege is constructed alter over time” (Carroll 9). White masculinity is not unmarked, as traditional thinking goes, but is always reworking itself in order to keep its preeminence (Carroll
While Don Draper is relatively unmarked, his mysterious past wiping any rough edges away, Tony Soprano is surely not – his Italian Americanness is front and center. This is perhaps the most significant difference between the two protagonists. The edited volume *A Sitdown with the Sopranos* looks at how the series portrays Italian American culture, all from Italian American writers, showing how essential this characteristic is to the show’s identity. In particular, one essay looks at the various ways in which both Italian American culture and mob culture influence Tony’s view on his own masculinity. For Tony, manhood is not just about whether his actions fall into a masculine or feminine pattern – there is also the confluence of Italian American culture, mainstream American culture, and the mobster culture to discuss. Tony often discusses the days of yesteryear, implying that his father – hegemonically masculine, by all accounts – had it right, and now, the code of honor has been damaged irreparably (Rotundo 67-8). So, while Tony is wrapped in American hegemonic masculine whiteness as much as Don Draper, it is important to remember many of his choices are informed by his lineage, and the pressures it poses, as well.

Depictions of strong, white masculinity are littered throughout American popular culture, due to both financial and cultural reasons. Much like white men controlled advertising in the 1960s, white men have also controlled television. Thus, white men have always been popular choices to lead television shows, even well into the 2010s. Representation has improved steadily over the years, yet white characters still account for 77 percent of all broadcast series regulars, according to GLAAD's annual *Where We Are On TV* Report for 2013. Furthermore, 57 percent of broadcast series regulars are male (“*Where We Are On TV*”). And even though television as a whole is skewed towards white men, leading roles in prestige cable dramas are even more skewed – a white male helms nearly every successful show. Behind the scenes, men also
dominate jobs in writing, producing, directing, editing, cinematography, and virtually every other television production role, so more shows are made about men. The statistics bear this out—while the numbers are steadily rising, women still only comprise 28 percent of these behind-the-scenes jobs (Lauzen 1).

In Brett Martin's *Difficult Men*, a cultural analysis of serialized drama between 1998 and 2013, he posits that shows about white middle-aged men flourished because white middle-aged male producers had the creative freedom to make shows about topics of their choosing (13). He quotes Peter Ligouri, a FX executive, as saying, “‘I was looking at the body of shows I was associated with and I realized, 'Oh my God, Vic Mackey: forty-year-old guy, flawed. Screwed up. The two guys from *Nip/Tuck*, same descriptor...It was like I was looking at Sybil”’ (Martin, *Difficult Men* 13). Shows about white men abounded not just because they had historically been popular, but because when the people in charge had the power to make more creatively diverse shows, they looked inward. This method of show selection has not changed into 2014—the majority of shows still place white males at their center, whether to continue to capitalize on the popularity of shows like *The Sopranos* or *Breaking Bad*, or to continue to indulge in the fantasies of white middle-aged producers. Perhaps the answer lies in risk assessment—networks were already taking significant risks by putting unlikable characters as leads in shows like *The Sopranos*, so they did not want to risk further changing of the formula. Then, the industry tried to reproduce the success of *The Sopranos* by creating similar shows, and any look at *The Sopranos* has to start at its physical and emotional center, Tony Soprano.

But a simply financial look at why these kinds of characters abounded in the early 2000s would not do the characters themselves justice, because so many of them struggle with the same problems, problems that many American men have faced: what does it mean to be a man in
modern America? What defines masculinity? In particular, for these characters, who are prioritized for their intellectual pursuits, they struggle to put a sufficiently masculine foot forward, and many of their antiheroic pursuits are a response to a seeming inadequacy. This can further Martin's assertion that these characters are fulfilling a fantasy for producers – antiheroism on the scale of Tony Soprano or Don Draper is something they could not easily pull off. Instead of making Tony and Don completely relatable, producers put them in extreme positions where their masculinity is perpetually questioned, requiring them to look deeply at themselves. Any first look at Tony’s and Don's masculinity would have to start with a primary way they define themselves, and where many of the threats to their masculinity come from: their jobs.

In fact, the danger of Tony seeming weak or feminine drives the plot of both the pilot and Season 1 – Tony worries that if anyone finds out he is going to therapy and has panic attacks, then they will not follow his orders. In Tony's world, there is a very clear dividing line between everything that is masculine – violence, infidelity, drugs – and everything that is feminine, or weak. This is not just seen through verbal slurs like “pussy” or “faggot” hurled at nearly every character throughout the show's run for seemingly minor things. The danger inherent in being different is obvious, but becomes especially apparent in Season 6, where Vito Spatafore is outed as being gay. After fleeing New Jersey for gay-friendly New Hampshire, he returns home, seeking leniency, and is murdered. Vito’s arc shows that if you’re seen as anything less than fully masculine, you are a threat that must be dealt with. This is also seen during the first season episode “Boca,” where word gets out that Uncle Junior enjoys performing cunnilingus on his girlfriend, which sets off a game of back-and-forth between Junior and Tony that, combined with Tony’s mother’s wishes, end up with the two trying to murder each other. In the mobster subculture, deviancy is defined very differently than for everybody else, and even performing
oral sex on a woman is a potential detriment toward one’s masculinity (Nochimson, “Waddaya Lookin’ At?” 195).

Thus, for Tony, performing masculinity properly is not just important personally – it is also vital to keeping both his job and his life. The instigator of the series’ plot comes when a family of ducks that Tony has been nurturing leaves his pool. He begins reliving various parts of his troubled life, which leads to panic attacks, forcing him to see a therapist. Placing so much meaning onto a family of ducks just elicits a raised eyebrow from his family, but if his Mafia family knew, they would question Tony’s leadership. For Nochimson, the ducks represent Tony’s “seductive innocence,” his charm that wins over the audience, even as he murders, lies, and cheats (“Waddaya Lookin’ At?” 193).

The best example of the masculine traits necessary to be a mob boss comes in the Season 6 episode, “Mr. & Mrs. John Sacrimoni Request...” In the four episodes prior, Tony has been shot and had a difficult time recovering, and as this episode begins, he is attempting to make up for lost time. The main plot centers around Johnny Sack's daughter's wedding, which requires Johnny to be released from prison for the day. Johnny, who is in approximately the same position Tony is in with the New York mafia, is already seen as weak because his time in prison seems to have no end in sight. His lieutenants begin discussing other candidates to run the family, and U.S. Marshals pull up to retrieve Johnny. They block the limo in which his daughter and son-in-law are leaving the reception. Because Johnny just wants to see his daughter drive off (and doesn’t want to ruin her wedding), he begins to sob uncontrollably. The camera lingers on Phil Leotardo, one of Johnny's lieutenants who could take his place, and Tony, who both look concerned. Phil, Tony, and some lieutenants from both families discuss the scene, and Phil says, “My estimation of John Sacrimoni as a man just fucking plummeted.” Tony attempts to defend
Phil, explaining that his daughter's wedding day should be emotional, but Phil responds, “Cry like a woman? It's a fucking disgrace...Even Cinderella didn't cry.” Clearly, Phil equates expressing emotions as feminine, and crying is everything hegemonic masculinity is not. This time, as Tony's second-in-command agrees with Phil, Tony gives up his argument and must consider his next move. When he returns to Satriale's, one of his primary bases of operation, he picks a fight with a newbie in his crew, nicknamed Muscles Marinara, and bloodies him. Marinara, understandably, does not want to attack his boss, so he takes the brunt of the fight and does not fight back. The episode ends with Tony triumphantly walking away, into the bathroom, where he promptly vomits blood. He stares into the mirror, smiles, and then vomits again as the screen cuts to black.

“Mr. & Mrs. John Sacrimoni Request...” is not one of The Sopranos's more subtle episodes, but the point is still effective: even though Tony’s dominance is not actively under threat, he cannot allow himself to appear weak even for a moment – he must remain aggressive. As Muscles Marinara's nickname implies, he was the most masculine looking in the room, so Tony performed a coded masculine action – fighting – in order to prove his own superiority. When Phil speaks about John, he explicitly calls him feminine, and says that even a Disney princess is more manly than he is. A man cannot be a man who cries, according to Phil, and that makes Tony's actions at the end of the episode clear. But even as the men may see Tony as stronger now, the audience knows this is a facade – Tony is still very weak, but at least he seems a man to himself, as evidenced by his smile. This speaks to the idea that Tony's actions at the end of the episode are just a performance, and more broadly, that Tony's masculine charade throughout the series is a performance.
While many academic writing regarding hegemonic masculinity are concerned with mental characteristics, the physical body is important to consider as well. Tellingly, both Tony and Don have strong masculine bodies, albeit in different ways. James Gandolfini, even in his early days in the role, never has a particularly svelte figure, yet Tony is never ashamed of his body – early in the pilot, he appears only in boxers, with his shirtless belly poking out, in front of his family and his daughter’s friend. Still, despite his weight and balding head, Tony is a sex symbol. Part of this is Tony’s persistent physicality, including kisses on the cheek between friends, important handshakes, and the significance placed on meals and eating, all of which are characteristic of the gangster genre and his Italian heritage (Nochimson, “Waddaya Lookin’ At?” 190-1).

Eventually, Gandolfini put on more weight, and Carmela in seasons five and six comments on Tony’s needing to watch his figure. And while fat bodies are typically desexualized, Tony defies that throughout the series. His fatness is both Tony’s downfall and the source of his strength: “His body represents a plethora of signs…that signify his affluence, influence, power, heterosexuality, and masculinity” (Mitchell 184-5). Yet, throughout, Tony’s body is never as complex of a battlefield as his mind in defining his masculinity. He always strikes an imposing figure, which commands its own dominance and aggression, which never puts him in a position of weakness, except in the episode discussed above, when a gunshot wound makes him potentially vulnerable. Thus, there is harmony on the surface of Tony Soprano but conflict overall, as his mental qualities are more accurately described as typically feminine.

We see this complexity in Don Draper as well. Returning to the *Mad Men* pilot, Don is immediately a formidable figure. Alan Sepinwall describes Jon Hamm as having “the kind of square-jawed, classically handsome look that, with the right haircut, made him look like he had
stepped right out of a cab from 1960,” (Revolution 312-3) and William Siska says that Don most resembles Gary Cooper, partially because he is quiet and mysterious (198). Indeed, Hamm embodies the hegemonic masculine ideals of years past, with Sepinwall arguing that Hamm failed to find jobs in the past because Hollywood had moved past that kind of hunky male figure (Revolution 313). In short, Don’s body is extremely masculine, posing him no significant problems. As far as his job, inside the world of the show, Don is viewed as the über-ad man, with the ability to seduce any woman and keep any client. Furthermore, in the pilot, while the other, younger executives make aggressive comments towards female employees, Don reprimands them, signaling that he’s different than the political and sexual norms of the day, even though the complexity of his relationship with women in the office is clearly just beginning.

Don’s job, however, is less explicitly masculine than Tony’s, and this presents significant dramatic possibilities for Matthew Weiner and Mad Men. While Don’s masculine qualities make him a great ad man – his aggression in keeping clients, challenging authority, and being a strong physically – the artistic qualities inherent in creating advertising often tap into his emotional side. In a famous scene from the first season’s finale, Don discusses Kodak’s new product, a slide projector called The Wheel. Don, in using pictures of his own family, explains that it should instead be called The Carousel, and in so doing, comments on the character’s and the show’s views of nostalgia: “It goes backwards and forwards, and it takes us to a place where we ache to go again” (“The Wheel”). This causes a mid-level ad executive, Harry Crane, to run out of the room crying, but Don is confident and calm, never breaking his presentational voice. Apparently, Don’s use of and appeal to emotion in this pitch is successful – the Kodak executives buy the pitch, although Harry’s outburst is noted as excessive.
In the Season 6 finale, however, Don’s personal life is in a much more chaotic place, and a similar pitch goes in a different direction. Don begins by telling a fabricated story in which his father would bring him to the store to buy a Hershey bar, which the executives love. After the successful pitch, while the other executives make small talk, Don interrupts with the true story of how much Hershey meant to him as a child – he grew up in a whorehouse, and if he stole enough money from men’s wallets as they were having sex, then the women would buy him a Hershey’s bar. Don breaks down near the story’s end, as he says, “[the Hershey bar] was the only sweet thing in my life” (“In Care Of”). While this is a much more emotional story, and clearly means a lot to Don, the room is stunned by his emotional display, especially after successfully giving the original pitch. The camera work accentuates this, cutting to each individual silent Hershey’s executive before showing a wide shot of the room, with a distraught, sobbing Don in its center. As a result, Don is placed on a mandatory leave of absence, which places his job in question – his emotional outburst outweighs his other masculine qualities and was not good for the male-dominated business. Fittingly, this leads to a breakthrough in his personal life, as he drives his children to his childhood home, the whorehouse, which they knew nothing about. Don’s job is nearly defined by the tension between the masculine and the feminine, and certain performances (during pitch meetings, most frequently) can be read as more masculine or feminine than others, and this defines their overall success.

Yet pitch meetings are not the only sites of performance for Don. In the pilot, Pete Campbell, a mid-level accounts executive, follows Don, complimenting him and backing up his decisions coming out of meetings. Later, Pete admits he wants Don’s job, but that they can peacefully coexist at the top. While his motivations are clear, Pete clearly likes Don – after a bad meeting, Pete tells him, “A man like you, I’d follow into combat blindfolded” (“Smoke Gets In
Your Eyes”). This is not just a clever metaphor, however – the pilot also has two smaller nods towards Don’s military service. Briefly, while he’s alone, he checks a drawer in his desk and looks at a Purple Heart, and later, while he’s attempting to sleep in his office, he briefly hears bombs as he wakes up. These small hints were added due to a network note from AMC executive Rob Sorcher, who liked the pilot but wanted Don to have a secret to make him more vulnerable (Sepinwall, Revolution 312). This nugget wound up forming a large part of the first season’s overarching plot and the series’ key question: who is Don Draper? It turns out, Don was originally born Dick Whitman, the son of a prostitute. Dick stumbled into stealing the identity of Donald Draper, who died in the Korean War, and took his life, essentially recreating himself in the process into a charming salesman.

After the first season, the question of Don Draper’s past may have been revealed, but each season since has been obsessed with the question of how Don constructs himself, both internally and externally, and what that means. Once Pete finds out Don’s secret, he says that Don is “a liar and a cheat and possibly worse,” and much of the series is devoted to what type of man Don has made himself into (“Nixon vs. Kennedy”). This is not a simple process – it is not as if Don Draper was just added to the Dick Whitman persona. Don attempts to reinvent himself (a “quintessentially American” thing to do), and this means that his authenticity is now in question (Siska 200).

The creation of Don Draper not only mirrors how Weiner and his writing staff created Don, but also how human beings perform in their lives. Kaganovsky makes the case that because Don has to construct every part of his identity vis a vis Dick Whitman, it follows that he had to construct every part of his gender as well – so it makes sense that he chooses the most dominant, hegemonic aspect of that gender to perform (253). This creates a good deal of irony for Don –
outsiders think he has everything, but in reality, “There is no Don Draper and there is no Dick Whitman...Don himself is nothing” (252). So if he is performing as all of these things and failing, who is he truly?

One of the curious things about Mad Men is how drastically it changes when the setting shifts to California. The show does one or two California episodes per season, and when he returns to the home of the former Donald Draper, the Don we know is a very different person. As Jon Hamm put it, “The one counterweight [to Don’s issues] was California. Every time he went to California you could see that something changed in this guy. His hair was looser. His back wasn’t so rigid. It was just a completely different vibe when he was there. It was the one true connection to his past” (Lacob). Of course, here “his past” is used loosely, to mean both the death of Dick Whitman and the original Don Draper, and the birth of the new Don Draper, who revels in a chance to embrace the complexity of his identity and masculinity, far away from the eyes of his family and coworkers. Sometimes in California, he makes rash decisions, like proposing to his secretary that he had only known briefly in the Season 4 finale. Other times, he takes drugs and hallucinates, dredging up more of his past. Maybe the most significant trip was in Season 2’s “The Mountain King,” where Don ends the episode by plunging himself into the Pacific Ocean. This impromptu baptism serves as a reminder of the rebirth of identity that California can give to Don, even though the audience does not get to see the immediate aftermath.

The significance of these California episodes prove that construction of identity is a deliberate occurrence in the world of Mad Men, which gives more credence to the idea that everything about Don is constructed, including his ideal masculinity. In the Season 4 episode “The Suitcase,” Don refers to Anna Draper, the wife of the late Donald Draper, as “the only
person who ever really knew me,” implying that his California self is somehow more authentic than the New York City Don or the Ossining Don (where he lives with Betty and his children from Seasons 1 to 3). Through his complex past and his unusual trips to the West Coast, Don’s identity is clearly a complex, deliberate construction, full of signs and actions that Don chooses to portray at certain times and repress at others. It remains to be seen whether Don’s revelation at the end of Season 6 – and his decision to let his children into his life as Dick Whitman – will be a permanent change.

The sense of loss of identity, and that lost identity’s ties to hegemonic masculinity, also can be seen in *The Sopranos*. The show devotes nearly two full episodes to Tony’s adventures in purgatory as Kevin Finnerty, and when Tony awakens from his coma, he asks, “Who am I? Where am I going?” (“Mayhem”). But even going back to the pilot, Tony has two major speeches, both told to Melfi during their first therapy session, and both hearken back to the days of masculinity popular during the days of Don Draper. Relatively unprompted, Tony first says that he thinks about the days of his father – in the late 1960s into the 1970s – and while he never was as successful as Tony is, “They had their standards. They had pride. Today, whadda we got?” While many of Don’s hegemonic qualities center around his looks, Tony is referring to deeper principles that reflect the character of a man, such as agreed-upon rules and a bond to his community. Over the course of the series, it becomes clear that these standards no longer exist, since Tony consistently is forced to deal with people who, in his eyes, do not respect him, such as his cousin, Tony Blundetto. At the same time, in flashbacks to his father’s day, the same problems appear to exist, so it’s unclear whether these standards ever existed, or whether Tony is simply participating in nostalgia.
In a famous monologue in the middle of the pilot, Tony lays out his view of the mythic American man, embodied in Gary Cooper, and simultaneously charts a map for the rest of the series:

Lemme tell you something. Nowadays, everybody’s gotta go to shrinks and counselors and go on Sally Jesse Raphael and talk about their problems. Whatever happened to Gary Cooper? The strong, silent type. That was an American. He wasn’t in touch with his feelings. He just did what he had to do. See, what they didn’t know is once they got Gary Cooper in touch with his feelings, that they wouldn’t be able to shut him up. And then it’s dysfunction this and dysfunction that and dysfunction va fa culo!

Much of *The Sopranos* centers around Tony’s efforts to lock down his emotions, a battle that he perpetually loses much like he struggles to keep hold of his dual families. While he decries therapy in the pilot, it ultimately does quell his anxiety attacks, and he develops a friendship with Melfi that, while not perfect, is often more stable than his relationships with his coworkers and family. Although Melfi closes her doors on Tony in the penultimate episode of the series, he meets with her in nearly every other episode of the series. Tony’s perspective is that feelings and therapy are inherently feminine, and that concept does not change throughout the series, as he frequently walks out on Melfi as she approaches a difficult subject. Indeed, after the above speech, she asks him point blank if he’s depressed, and it triggers the first walk-out of the series. Just before he leaves, however, he says, “I understand therapy as a concept. But in my world, it does not go down.” This statement works as a comment on the static nature of most
television characters – if Tony really learned from Melfi, he would lose the sociopathic tendencies that audiences watch him for – but Tony is also commenting on how deeply his problems, the gap between his expectations and his reality, are ingrained in himself.

This combination of a masculine exterior and a conflicted interior is a driver of the masculinity in crisis narrative in both shows, and any movement toward resolving these conflicts is typically greeted with cynicism. Kaganovsky says that Don is often placed in the “feminine position” – somewhere in-between “‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ and the power/pleasure of looking,” which is atypical for television (253). Particularly, *Mad Men* seems to be obsessed with characters looking in mirrors, attempting to find self-identity and constantly failing. Indeed, it seems like even when a character makes a step towards a more concrete identity, the lesson is quickly forgotten. In the Matthew Weiner-penned “Kennedy and Heidi,” Tony shouts, “I GET IT!” into the Grand Canyon, and the next episode never comments on whatever Tony “got” or its significance. Similar half-revelations have struck Don over the years as well, as he finds temporary happiness (such as in his new marriage with Megan, introduced in the finale of Season 4) before falling back into old habits (cheating, as teased in the final moments of Season 5). This tension between character movement, necessary to keep the show fresh, and character consistency, necessary to sustain the show’s premise, is central to any television program, yet is especially acute here considering the antiheroism of the protagonists. When viewed through this lens, masculinity is a key site of conflict for the identities of Tony and Don.

Clearly, these shows are concerned with much of the same thing: the changing place of men in 21st century America. Many ways, the two series seem to be in conversation with each other over the ways in which Tony’s and Don’s attempts to navigate a hegemonic reading of masculinity. Yet, it would not be accurate to call either of these shows wholly masculine
television programs. While Tony is clearly the center of *The Sopranos*’s orbit, the women in his life are given significant screen time, and often disrupt Tony’s masculine façade. And while Don is the lead in *Mad Men*, Peggy Olsen is nearly a co-lead at times, as much of the series seems to be about how Peggy is slowly morphing into a female version of Don. The white male antihero is, at his center, the site of a series of contradictions – he is able to take what he wants due to his power and privilege like in the good old days, yet he can be emotionally defeated by his personal life. In short, while both shows make masculinity a primary theme, it would be inaccurate to discuss masculinity without considering the significant contributions of female characters to the show and the white male antihero archetype. After all, at the end of the first season of *The Sopranos*, Tony tells Carmela, “Cunnilingus and psychiatry brought us to this.” These are both things that, in Tony’s world, women are to blame for (“I Dream of Jeannie Cusamano”).
CHAPTER III: HUMANIZING THE ANTIHERO THROUGH GENDERED SPACES

The entry point to the world of *Mad Men* for the audience is not the protagonist, Don Draper – it’s Peggy Olson. It’s Peggy’s first day, and office manager Joan Holloway walks her through the open space of the office, which is full of women typing at small desks and men walking into their offices. Joan then gives Peggy a rundown of how to succeed in the office, including tips on fashion, her body, and how to deal with the men (“He may act like he wants a secretary, but most of the time, they’re looking for something between a mother and a waitress. And the rest of the time, well…”). All of the tips Joan gives Peggy are intended to make her more palatable to the men of the office, with everyone’s ultimate goal to marry a man and raise a family out in the country. Other men and women repeat this message to Peggy too. When she goes to see a doctor for birth control, he lectures not to become a “strumpet,” ending with, “Easy women don’t find husbands.” During a pitch meeting gone awry with Rachel Menken, the head of a department store, Don walks out and says, “This is ridiculous. I’m not going to let a woman talk to me like this” – yet later in the season, he has an affair with her. Don makes up with her later in the episode and asks why she isn’t married yet. Finally, Peggy ends her first day by making a pass at Don by placing her hand on top of his, applying Joan’s earlier advice too aggressively. He rejects her, saying that he makes a clear separation between boss and boyfriend. But those roles are complicated before the episode has even ended. A junior executive, Pete Campbell, shows up at Peggy’s apartment, and has sex with her. Don has had quite a day – continuing an affair with another woman (Midge, a young bohemian artist), starting an affair with Rachel, nailing a pitch with his firm’s biggest client, and then going home to his wife and two children. In the episode’s final shot, Don sits by the children’s bedside and strokes their heads, with Betty Draper watching adoringly from the door. The camera pans and pulls back out
of the house through the window, eventually leaving only Don in frame, illustrating how little his wife matters in his day-to-day activities.

It is important to note the sheer frequency with which the *Mad Men* pilot brings up gender relations. By grounding so much of the conflict in the expectations between men and women, the show makes clear that it is not afraid to tackle this issue, and this, along with the slippery nature of identity, gender has been a key theme of the show through its first six seasons. The pilot is one of the show’s least subtle episodes, in that it makes clear throughout that women do not have the same inherent privilege as the men do. Yet, it also shows, in small moments, that the women are fighting back to reclaim their own identities. Joan, after giving Peggy fashion tips, makes a quip about men making typewriters easy enough for a woman to use, which Peggy takes seriously. Furthermore, Joan is one of the smartest people in the office, evidenced by her deep knowledge of how to manipulate the men and women of the office to do her bidding, even if she has to have sex to do it. While being examined by the doctor, Peggy stares deeply at a landscape painting on a calendar, showing that she longs to be in a different place in her life. And Rachel is proud to rebuff the expectations of men by taking control of her family’s department store. She tells Don, during their dinner, “I’ve never realized it before this moment…but it must be hard being a man too,” redirecting Don’s questions back at him. Her lack of pity for Don is underscored by her experience being a high-profile woman living in a man’s world, and her initial refusal to have an affair with Don underscores that she is fighting a battle against the typical narrative of her era.

In the second episode of the series, while thinking about Betty’s depression, Don gestures around his office and says, “Who could not be happy with all this?” (“Ladies Room”). Of course, he is speaking about Betty (whom we know to be unhappy, despite her cool exterior) and himself
(his own discomfort becomes obvious in the next episode, when he drunkenly flees his daughter’s birthday party). In fact, while both Mad Men and The Sopranos are male-dominated in their main plots, women are key to understanding the white male antiheroes at their centers. This is not their only function in the narrative, but it is through their interaction with the men that the emotionality and intellectuality of the antihero is revealed.

We can’t fully understand Don without thinking about his relationship with Peggy and his wives, or Tony’s with Carmela and Melfi. These relationships tend to fall into three types: marriage, affair, and platonic, and all illustrate aspects of the antihero. Some relationships allow the show to assert their masculinity, and some complicate it and frame the men closer to femininity. Particularly in the Mad Men episode “The Suitcase,” the function of platonic relationships shines through, as they provide opportunities for the antihero to express his emotions in a safe, private way. Because Peggy is the one woman Don Draper will not sleep with, hegemonic gender conventions are often blurred in their working relationship, allowing the antihero to become more humanized during these emotional periods. The antihero’s interactions with women allow for complicated gendered spaces, where the insecurities and failed masculinity of the antihero can be interrogated, such as a bar in “The Suitcase” and Melfi’s office. And while the sexual relationships reveal the antihero’s proclivity for sex, violence, and infidelity, they also promote the uniqueness of the platonic relationship. Overall, these interactions represent another strategy for exploring struggle of the antihero’s identity, but they juxtapose this struggle against feminism. The beginning of Mad Men is also the beginning of second wave feminism, and in The Sopranos, most of the female characters are housewives, negotiating their roles in a world changed by feminism and the Peggy Olsons of the world.
Both Tony and Don are dinosaurs in their time periods, and the shows actively use that the audience knows their lifestyles are nearly extinct. Feminism and the civil rights movement are coming for Don, represented by Peggy’s gradual rise towards his job. For Tony, the “strong, silent type” that the world once expected of him is unreachable, and the FBI makes the gangster work of the old days impossible. Particularly in Mad Men, Matthew Weiner goes to pains in the first season to show that the protagonists are on the wrong side of history, including backing Richard Nixon in the 1960 Presidential campaign. This is a clever way to comment on the progress (or lack of progress) of feminism in the intervening years, as we see how women like Carmela Soprano (and later, Meadow Soprano) have reacted to the social changes that women like Peggy Olson fought for. And yet, even The Sopranos is not inherently pessimistic regarding progress – Dr. Melfi is a legitimately heroic character at times, and Tony is always viewed as the force keeping Carmela down. Similarly, Mad Men makes both of Don’s wives into sympathetic characters and makes Don’s relationship with Peggy the emotional lynchpin of the show. Thus, the women of these shows are just as important to study as the men at their centers.

In order to understand the female characters of Mad Men, it is critical to understand where they stand socially when the series begins in 1960. It is also noteworthy that the show’s approach to gender is different than its approach to race. As discussed above, gender is at the forefront immediately, and while men still hold a majority of the main roles, women do get significant screen time, particularly Peggy, Betty, Joan, and later Sally and Megan Draper. The opposite is true for race relations – Mad Men has never had an African-American main character and rarely discusses race openly. The most prominent non-white member of the show is Dawn, Don’s secretary, who is hired only after a publicity stunt gone awry attracts black applicants for a job in Season 5.
The difference between the show’s treatment of race and gender seems intentional. *Mad Men*’s central relationship is between Don and Peggy, and since both are white but both are not men, gender is a central dynamic in their stories. Especially in the first few seasons, the series first appears to ignore the growing political unrest of the period, as this was not something privileged characters like Don would consider significant. Because the show is centered on the perspective of the socially dominant, even if it does not entirely sympathize with that point of view, little attention is given to the few non-white characters, like Hollis, the elevator operator. While non-white characters appear a few times a season, the ease with which they are dispatched by both the characters and the narrative makes clear that the show’s perspective is one of whiteness (Ono 315-6). By making race such a small part of these character’s lives, when it was such a major part of so many other’s, *Mad Men* is making a statement of its own.

Because of its constant presence, the show’s message on gender is ultimately stronger and more complex. In its first season, *Mad Men* shows gender discrimination mostly through small, everyday moments, instead of plots overtly devoted to feminist messages. Importantly, Don is rarely the instigator of these incidents. Instead, mid-level staffers and secondary characters like Ken Cosgrove or Freddy Rumsen are the primary agitators. For example, during an office party, Ken tackles a woman to the ground and demands to see what color her underwear is. When she refuses, he forcibly pulls her dress up amidst laughter from coworkers and the woman herself. After he sees her underwear, he invites her out and she leaves with him (“Nixon vs. Kennedy”). Upon seeing this, Peggy leaves the party, but events like this are commonplace enough to make the Sterling Cooper offices a location of perpetual, casual sexism.

The second episode, titled “Ladies Room,” further emphasizes institutionalized sexism with a stylized montage of men (excluding Don) leering at the new girl, Peggy, as they walk past
her desk. In the primary plot, Don asks Roger Sterling, a partner, what women want in a product, and Roger replies flippantly, “Who cares?” This episode also provides a more substantial introduction to Betty as a character than her single scene in the pilot. Here we follow her to therapy to deal with depression. We see Don call her therapist at night to discuss what Betty talked about during the day, which illustrates that even when Betty believes she is free of his control, Don is listening. In the season finale Betty discovers the collusion between her therapist and Don, and we see her most substantial emotional conversation of the season with a neighbor’s young child, Glen, to whom she gave a lock of her hair previously, illustrating that her most honest relationship is with a child (“The Wheel”).

This episode also introduces an important idea - the ladies restroom is a key site of femininity for the employees of Sterling Cooper, and may be the only place they have that is untouched by masculine influence. The episode includes a pair of scenes in the ladies room. In the first, Peggy walks in on a woman crying intensely, and Joan tells Peggy to ignore her and to forget about it. In the second, Peggy later sees another crying woman and ignores her, which demonstrates how Peggy is pressured to become masculinized. Peggy must repress her emotion, turning more towards masculine characteristics as soon as she enters the office. Wherever the office is located (as the firm changes locations between Seasons 3 and 4), the ladies room is a place where women can meet, talk, and cry without interference from the men in their lives. The ladies room is a feminized place, one of the only ones where women can meet without facing sexist barbs in their lives.

As the first season progresses, Peggy writes copy for “female” products like lipstick and a weight loss supplement. The response from the office to a secretary writing copy is typical – Freddy Rumsen says it is like watching a “dog play the piano,” and many men assume that she
slept with Don to get the job (“Babylon”; “For Those Who Live Young”). “Babylon” also gives the first extended look at Joan, who is savvy and smart in her job, yet sleeps with her boss, Roger, and feels trapped in her job, with no upward mobility, and her romance, with no chance of marriage. This feeling is also expressed by Betty in episode nine, “Shoot,” which ends with her in a nightgown, smoking, shooting her neighbor’s pigeons with a BB gun. In this episode a rival firm that is trying to lure Don away hires Betty for a photo shoot for a Coca-Cola ad, as she was a model before she met Don. Don sees the photos and turns the rival firm down, which causes them to fire Betty. The director of the shoot unhelpfully tells her, “Oh honey, it has nothing to do with you,” only underlining her powerlessness in her situation (“Shoot”). The end of the episode shows Betty attempting to gain some control over her life, even if it’s a small gesture like firing a gun in suburbia. The image is that of a woman attempting to grasp power in a masculine world, something that Betty will generally fail to do in the future.

Thus, the first season presents a picture of patriarchal dominance, unchecked for the moment but with clear signs of change around the corner, like Peggy’s ascendance to copywriter. This season is essential in establishing the setting’s historical context, so when Peggy begins her rise through the Sterling Cooper ranks, the audience knows how significant it is that she is succeeding in this environment. While Don only promotes her initially to punish Pete, he does not judge her work differently because of her sex, unlike most of her coworkers. Indeed, as soon as Peggy’s first pitch meeting, before she even becomes a junior copywriter, Don acts as her mentor by giving good-natured criticism of her work. Afterward, she timidly asks Don for a promotion, and he says, “You presented like a man, now act like one” (“Long Weekend”). As the ladies room is a site of femininity, the conference room is a site of masculinity, one that Don has his greatest successes in and one that Peggy gradually succeeds at herself. Also, this is the start
of a long pattern of Don masculinizing Peggy to suggest how she must become more like him to succeed. This process continues until she takes Don’s job at the end of Season 6.

Peggy’s early role in the narrative is defined by her affair with Pete, which begins in the pilot. As this is a relationship enacted behind closed doors, the audience only gets periodic looks into it, such as Peggy and Pete having sex again in the series’ eighth episode, the second and last time they have sex. Then, in the closing minutes of the first season finale, Peggy discovers she is pregnant with Pete’s baby as she begins to go into labor. She initially refuses to even hold the baby, partly because it was Pete’s (whom she had a falling out with) and partly because being a single mother will make her career practically impossible (“The Wheel”). In a flashback in Season 2, it is revealed that Don was the only person to visit her in the hospital. Don, relying on his own past and muddled identity, tells her, “This never happened. It will shock you how much it never happened” (“The New Girl”). Clearly, Don is speaking from experience, but Peggy takes his advice and the show follows her lead – the next time the pregnancy is directly mentioned is in Season 4’s “The Suitcase.” This is partially because a pregnancy between an unmarried woman and a married man would have been avoided in conversation, especially in that time. But due to her job and the way she looks up to Don, Peggy essentially refuses her womanhood, which allows her to spend more time focusing on her career. This is another instance of Peggy becoming masculinized – while she tells Pete that she’d like to become a mother some day in the future, she makes the choice to abandon feminine parts of her life in order to succeed in her male-dominated career.

Throughout Season 3, Peggy continues to grow in value to the agency, writing better copy and getting attention from the partners, who include Don at this point. The casual sexism present in Season 1 is still a part of the setting, to be sure, but Peggy is its target much anymore –
by attempting to be one of the boys, she is not the butt of as many jokes or sexualized looks. At the end of the season, Don loses his perfect home life, and he moves into an apartment in the city and begins to see prostitutes. This is the set-up to the Season 4 episode “The Suitcase,” one of the most important episodes in the show’s run, as it is essentially an intense study of Don and Peggy’s relationship. As previously mentioned, Mad Men utilizes short episodic storylines, but “The Suitcase” is even more focused than usual, as the camera doesn’t leave Don and Peggy for nearly the entire episode, whereas a typical episode will still have traditional B-, C-, and D-plots. It’s not quite a bottle episode (where no guest stars appear and no new sets are built in order to save costs), as Don and Peggy leave the office to visit a diner and bar, but it has the intense focus of one. “The Suitcase” begins with a few of Peggy’s male coworkers discussing the much-hyped boxing match of the evening, Sonny Liston vs. Cassius Clay. This match drives both the plot and provides some thematic heft, as the structure of the episode itself resembles two heavyweights trading blows. Don walks in and quickly makes a $100 bet on Liston – who, as history reveals, will lose to Clay – but he does not participate in their boxing conversation. Boxing provides an ongoing reminder of an intensely masculine sport that frames many of the episode’s conversations. The plot rests on the agency’s need for a campaign for a Samsonite suitcase, and Peggy and the men make a lacking pitch to Don involving football and rising star Joe Namath. Don makes the men leave, and tells Peggy, “I’m glad that this is an environment where you feel free to fail,” a typical critical comment at this point in their relationship. Already, the episode is highlighting the specialness of their relationship, as Don does not berate the other writers – he expects the best out of Peggy, and pushes her harder as a result.

Peggy later goes to the ladies room and has two conversations, one of which raises Peggy’s past and another that foreshadows her future, and both remind the audience of how
unique Peggy’s circumstances are. First, she meets Megan Calvet, the new front desk receptionist, who later marries Don. Megan is, in some ways, a foil for Peggy – a talented secretary who aspires to a higher station in life. But instead of doubling down on work as Peggy did, Megan goes with Don to California to watch his kids for him, which leads to his sudden proposal of marriage (“Tomorrowland”). It is her willingness to combine work and motherhood that Don finds so attractive. In Seasons 5 and 6, Peggy and Megan are often mirrored, as Peggy gets the bulk of Don at work and Megan attempts to control him at home. Next, Peggy meets Trudy Campbell, Pete’s wife, who has recently become pregnant after many attempts. Trudy has no idea that Peggy has already had Pete’s baby, of course, and has a pleasant conversation with her. It is Peggy’s birthday, and she has plans to go out with her boyfriend to dinner at a romantic restaurant. As she leaves, Trudy tells Peggy, “You know, 26 is still very young,” implying that Peggy still has time to get married and have a child (“The Suitcase”). These interactions reinforce Peggy’s lack of husband and child, as Megan and Trudy get married to the two men Peggy is closest to. The dramatic irony in this scene is palpable, but it also reinforces that the ladies room is a place where women can talk freely. However, Trudy shows that even this place is not fully safe. Hegemonic thinking has so influenced Trudy that she acts as a male mouthpiece, although the offhand comment does not seem to bother Peggy much.

The episode jumps forward to the end of the workday as Don asks Peggy for potential Samsonite pitches before she leaves the office, with Peggy believing that Don will modify her ideas anyway. Don, trying to change the subject, begins to ask Peggy about what she thinks of the two fighters, Liston and Clay. At this point, it becomes apparent that this is not a typical Don and Peggy moment, and, by extension, a typical Mad Men episode – Don is purposefully drawing out this conversation for little reason, as the work on Samsonite could easily be done the
following morning. Don begins to lecture on the difference between Liston and Clay – Liston is a hard worker while Clay is all swagger and bluster in interviews. Don’s earlier bet now makes more sense – he bets on Liston because he is what Don wishes himself to be, and that Clay represents what’s wrong with society. Like the Nixon presidential campaign, Don once again bets on the wrong symbol of the future.

At this point, Peggy and the audience find out that her boyfriend, Mark, brought Peggy’s family to dinner as a surprise, and that they have been waiting for her. Peggy attempts to leave, but Don once again appeals to her work ethic and says that he will have to do the entire campaign himself. Peggy begins to leave, but returns to her office and essentially breaks up with Mark over the phone. This phone call is fraught with tension – Mark is jealous of Don, since Peggy spends so much time with him, and Peggy’s mother briefly joins in to try to push Peggy towards settling down with a husband and children. Once again, Peggy ignores this clarion call towards marriage and motherhood, and returns to Don, the only consistent man in her life. She reenters Don’s office, puts down her coat and hat, and says, “You win. Again…It’s not my fault you don’t have a family or friends or anywhere else to go.” The line reminds us that at this point, neither Peggy nor Don has the support of family or friends – they only have each other.

The tension begins to steadily rise as Peggy brings up an advertisement from earlier in the season that Don won an award for, even though Peggy imagined the initial idea. She says that Don changed it in order to make it entirely his, while Don says her original idea was inherently flawed. Peggy begins to cry, as Don yells, “It’s your job! I give you money, you give me ideas!” While Peggy typically holds back emotional outbursts, she cannot as she gets to the heart of their disagreement and says, “But you never say thank you!” Don then launches into one of the more memorable, and important, speeches of the series:
THAT’S WHAT THE MONEY IS FOR! You’re young, you will get your recognition. And honestly it is absolutely ridiculous to be two years into your career and already counting your ideas. Everything to you is an opportunity. And you should be thanking me every morning when you wake up, along with Jesus, for giving you another day!

At this point, a very red-faced Don realizes that Peggy is crying, and he says, “Oh come on. I’m sorry about your boyfriend, okay!” Even though the office is empty, Peggy retreats to the ladies room to cry. Crying is a rare occurrence for Peggy, and the change of location suggests her discomfort with emotion, built up over years working with Don, who usually holds in his emotions. This scene gets to the heart of the gender dynamics of the Don-Peggy relationship – Peggy has relinquished many of her hegemonically feminine traits in order to please Don, but just wants to hear recognition of her accomplishments from the man himself. Don, meanwhile, is unable to comprehend a world where Peggy is forced to fight to present even basic ideas, since he has been in a seat of privilege for so long. Yet, it is clear that Don feels responsible for Peggy’s maturation into a good copywriter, and Peggy requires Don’s recognition. It is a complex relationship, and a rarity in television because there is no will-they-won’t-they sexual tension at its core.

It’s also not hard to see the metaphor in this scene. (Indeed, later in the episode, after thinking about his uncle’s saying that a suitcase always has to be packed, Don says, “Jesus, maybe it’s a metaphor,” as if to draw the audience’s attention to the metaphorical meaning of the episode.) Matthew Weiner is credited as the sole writer of the episode, and when discussing that
scene in particular, he said, “I’ve been Peggy and I’ve been Don in the work relationship. I worked for David Chase for four and a half years. I’ve mostly been Peggy in my career” (Lacob). Through the lens of intertextuality, this scene and the larger episode becomes not just about Don and Peggy, or even Matthew Weiner’s feelings on working with David Chase, but on the creative process as a whole. Later moments in the episode emphasize this further. Don tells Peggy that “The best idea always wins,” attempting to explain why he is so tough on her, and she says, justifying her lifestyle, “Life never feels as important as anything in that office.” In this interpretation, Mad Men is as much about gender as it is Weiner’s time on The Sopranos writing staff, and how he (as Peggy) consistently clashed with his mentor, leading to better work. Of course, by the end of Season 6, Peggy is settling into the role Weiner had circa 2007 – newly sitting in the seat of his mentor, preparing to do his job. This analysis, all-but confirmed by Weiner, reveals that the intertextuality between The Sopranos and Mad Men goes deeper than just the texts of both shows – it extends into Weiner’s biographical time he spent on the writing staff, and that the Don and Peggy relationship has been heavily influenced by his time of two auteurs clashing.

Don calls Peggy into his office and he claims that they speak freely and personally like friends, and Peggy disagrees. She takes a drink and then begins to complain that Mark never truly knew her, and that she is now single. Don then reveals that he grew up on a farm. This is something that, after five years of working with him, Peggy did not know, since Don keeps his past under such close wraps. It suggests that Don wants to become closer to her, because he often speaks of his life as Dick Whitman as a means of forming connections. Don’s back story softens him as a character, as honest human relationships are in short supply for the antihero.
Don and Peggy both ignore calls and decide to go to dinner and then a bar. The latter, especially, is a departure from the structured spaces of the office, and the new location facilitates their shift into sharing what is usually unspoken. First, Peggy says that the office believes she slept with Don to get her job, and Peggy bemoans the fact that everyone thinks “that the possibility was so remote.” Don says that Peggy is attractive and that he denied her because he wouldn’t sleep with someone from work, which is not true. Instead, it shows that their relationship is different than his other relationships with women, leading to more direct conversation that humanizes the antihero. Peggy then brings up that Don was the only person to visit her in the hospital after she gave birth, which marks the first time since the flashback in Season 2 that Peggy’s baby has been mentioned, and Peggy’s first time openly raising the topic. In particular, this conversation requires deep knowledge of the series to fully understand – neither character ever specifically states what they are talking about, since even in a bar, such talk would be scandalous. Don and Peggy outside of the office is a rare occurrence, but it allows for different conversations to take place, conversations that portray the deep bond between Don and Peggy that goes beyond a simple workplace fondness. Don asks her if she thinks about the baby, and Peggy says, “I try not to. But then it comes up out of nowhere. Playgrounds…” As she trails off, Don stares at her, clearly upset at Peggy’s past, further showing that Don cares for others, something not as obvious in his everyday life. The conclusion of the fight on the radio cuts their conversation off. As Don hears that Liston is down, he yells, “Get up! Get up!,” a call to his kind of masculinity as much as it is to Liston. This scene, more than any other in the episode, shows the affection the two characters have for each other. This is a discussion Peggy could have with no one else, and Don cares enough about Peggy to legitimately care about her stories, something he does not even do for his wives.
As they return to the office to gather their things and leave, Don gets very sick and needs to throw up. The camera shows the two bathroom doors, clearly marked, and Peggy (who is half-carrying Don) begins to go into the women’s restroom, then changes direction and goes into the men’s room. This can be read as a humorous moment, as Peggy may not want Don vomiting in a bathroom she’ll have to use the following day, but that image also illustrates the question that Peggy has throughout the series: will she be like Don, masculine and successful at a career, or like most of the women in the series, feminine and dealing with domestic matters? Instead of just positioning the conflict in Peggy’s desire to have both a job and a family, as many texts do, *Mad Men* situates the choice between masculine characteristics and feminine characteristics, reflected in Peggy’s nearly wholesale acceptance of masculine positions in the workplace, and Peggy’s choice in this situation – the men’s room – illustrates her ultimate choice in following Don. It also is a refutation of her crying in the ladies room earlier in the episode, indicating that it will not be a frequent stop for her in the future.

In the men’s room, however, Peggy is not entirely comfortable. A perspective shot of what she would see lingers on the urinals and sexist graffiti. Suddenly, Duck arrives, yelling for Peggy. He attempts to defecate in Don’s chair (although he is too drunk to notice that he is in Roger’s office) because he thinks Peggy has picked Don over him. Duck views Peggy as “just another whore” who sleeps with men in order to advance her career, and thinks she is now in love and sleeping with Don. Of course, this view on Peggy is exactly why Peggy does choose Don – she is not typical, and she chooses Don because he views her as more than just a potential partner in the bedroom. But Don and Duck, each thinking Peggy is having sex with the other, get into a fight. The scene is filled with masculine posturing, including Duck’s claim of 17 enemy kills at Okinawa as he wins. As Peggy returns to Don’s office afterwards, he has a colorful vomit
stain on his shirt, and Peggy asks, “How long are you going to go on like this?” A tired Don asks for a drink, and Peggy gets it for him, continuing to act as his caretaker. Once she sits down on the couch, he lays down on her lap, nearly falling asleep immediately. Peggy takes the drink herself, and Don murmurs, “Sorry if I embarrassed you,” and Peggy shushes him.

During the night, Don sees a vision of the former Don Draper’s wife, Anna Draper, smiling and holding a suitcase. When he wakes up, he finally returns a call in California he had received much earlier. He learns that Anna – the original Don Draper’s wife, with whom he had established a connection over his many trips to California – has died. As Don hangs up, he sees that Peggy has heard the phone call, and he breaks down in tears. Importantly, Don does not try and hide his tears or obscure his sense of loss – he is truly himself with Peggy in this moment. She walks over to him, pats him on the back, and Don says, “Somebody very…important to me died…the only person in the world who really knew me.” Peggy says that that’s not true, and this realization brings Don back to his normal self. In this brief period, Don lets his emotions free in front of someone else for one of the only times in the series, and this is correspondingly the lowest point for his hegemonic masculinity – his identity is torn between California and New York, he is physically disheveled, and appears weak in front of a person he cares about. Peggy’s role in this scene is ambiguous – she can be read as a mother figure, calming Don in the wake of his own identity crisis, or finally receiving the validation she was seeking from Don the entire time.

Peggy sleeps in the office and awakes to a whistle, blown by the mid-level employees who started the episode discussing the fight – her day with Don is over, and a more typical day has begun. As they argue over the fight, an unkempt Peggy sees a fresh Don, who keeps changes of clothes in his office, as she walks into his office. He has come up with a pitch for Samsonite,
utilizing the famous photo of Cassius Clay standing over Sonny Liston, and while Peggy initially points out some flaws in the campaign, she relents and admits it is a good idea. At this point, Peggy puts her hand on the art and Don puts his on top of hers. Peggy looks down, then at Don. He stares at her, Peggy nods, and then they go back to work.

This final moment between Don and Peggy is significant in many ways. It is a silent moment of mutual appreciation and a moment of platonic love and understanding, but it is also a reference to the pilot, where Peggy put her hand on top of his, trying to sleep with Don. The use of her hand here signals how far the two characters have come, how important they are to each other, and how significant their platonic relationship is to the show at large. This is underlined in the Season 5 episode “The Other Woman,” which ends with Peggy coming into Don’s office to resign. Don initially thinks this is a gambit to get a raise, but Peggy tells Don she has felt underappreciated the past year and that she accepted a job at a rival agency. During this explanation, Don expresses a few emotions, including confusion, anger, and acceptance. As Peggy is about to leave, he grabs her hand, kisses it, and holds the kiss for fifteen seconds, requiring Peggy to break the kiss by pulling away. Through these three scenes, we see that Peggy’s hand is a symbol of her relationship with Don. It establishes whether they are in their awkward beginnings (the pilot), their conflicted middle (“The Suitcase”), or their tearful goodbyes (“The Other Woman”). But in all cases, these scenes show that Don’s relationship with Peggy is different than his relationship with any other woman, which is why it is so important to study closely. Peggy is the only woman Don does not try and engage sexually, and it is no coincidence that he shares his most emotional moments with her. Without Peggy, Don would be nearly as sympathetic, so his antiheroic actions would fully dominate any reading of him as a character.
Don’s relationship with Peggy stands in contrast to how other women are treated, especially in later seasons, when roles for women were beginning to expand. The primary plot in “The Other Woman” concerns the firm’s strategy to get Jaguar as a client, which would require Joan to sleep with an older, overweight, balding man who has the power to sway the company. Joan is still the office manager at this point, even after years with the agency, and she tells the partners that she will sleep with the man if they give her a partnership and 5% ownership of the agency. All of the partners agree to ask Joan to do this except Don, who tells Joan that she should not go through with it. But due to airing this scene out of sequence, by the time Don tells Joan this, she has already slept with the man. Overall, Joan’s story has been marked with sex, whether in her affair with Roger, her baby with Roger, or her rape at the hands of her fiancée. While Joan is a minor character compared to Peggy, her plight serves as an example of an alternate route taken by a woman to gain power.

On the other side of Don’s life, Betty has gotten significantly less screen time since the end of Season 3, when she and Don separated. When she does reenter Don’s orbit, it is usually only temporarily and for matters directly related to femininity, such as dealing with their children or his affairs. Any Betty plot that does not relate to Don, such as troubles within her new marriage or struggles with her weight, usually gets little screen time. Furthermore, Don’s second wife, Megan, is somewhere between Betty and Peggy – she wants to be an actress, and Don struggles with another creative mind in his household, yet the story reverts to the same old struggles Don had with infidelity while with Betty earlier in the series. Thus, Don’s relationship with Peggy is complex, spanning work and home, while his relationship with other women in his life generally rest on traditional gender roles.
The Sopranos relies much on the same distinction – Tony’s relationship with Melfi is unlike any other relationship he has with men or women, and his other relationships with women typically rest within normal gender boundaries. Cokal makes the case that there are three primary locations for women to function in Tony’s life – in his home, dominated by Carmela, Melfi’s office, and the Bada Bing, dominated by strippers (108). Women are primarily entrenched in these spaces – Tony rarely encounters Melfi outside of her office, for example (something she notes is inappropriate when he sees her at a diner), and the show rarely follows a stripper home to see the rest of her life. Just as the ladies room is a key site of femininity for the women of Sterling Cooper, these sites are the primary spaces for the women in The Sopranos. Furthermore, each site “introduces a set of problems that help structure the overarching story of a man struggling against what he sees as his (and his culture’s) inevitable decline” (Cokal 109). Melfi’s office mostly helps Tony deal with his past and broader discussion of societal change over time, the Sopranos household allows for discussion of family, and the Bada Bing! introduces problems with Tony’s work and violence. For his part, Tony changes these spaces when he enters – the furniture in Melfi’s office is frequently tossed around, a literal change to the space – but the women also change him.

As discussed above in regard to “The Suitcase,” non-sexual relationships are key to understanding the antihero’s emotional state. In the safe space of Melfi’s office – far away from Satriale’s, a masculine site where the male mobsters often discuss business – Tony can discuss his thoughts, fears, and problems without fears of reprisal. Furthermore, because Melfi’s office is private, Tony’s discussion of his emotions does not jeopardize his hegemonic manhood. And just as Peggy is the key to unlocking Don as a character, Melfi serves the same function with Tony. Structurally, Melfi is what sets the show apart from other mob stories, and she gives the show
immediate tension from the very first scene, as a mobster going to see a psychiatrist is both dramatically interesting and puts the mobster in the position of weakness. She also acts as a reader of Tony, approximating the audience’s own emotional and intellectual distance to the protagonist (Plourde 75). She routinely allows Tony a safe space to retreat from his life and reflect, which opens up the series’ broader themes of family, history, and the decline of American culture. Without Melfi, the series would be about the crimes Tony commits, rather than why he commits them, which makes her a crucial character, even when she does not command storylines as many of the supporting male characters do (Cokal 115).

While *The Sopranos* does not have an episode as fully committed to the Tony-Melfi relationship as “The Suitcase” is, Season 3’s “Employee of the Month” has one of the few Melfi-centric plots of the series, as the episode follows her outside of the workplace. In particular, this episode seeks to underline how different Melfi and Tony are. Whereas most women sleep with Tony shortly after meeting him, Melfi has always resisted this impulse, although she dreams about it in a later episode. This also means their relationship has a different dynamic than the Don-Peggy relationship, as neither of the latter want to have sex with the other. This means, while Tony openly speaks about wanting to sleep with her and Melfi secretly imagines what it would be like, it takes Melfi’s strength to prevent her from doing so.

The episode provides two windows on Melfi’s personal life: her relationship with her ex-husband Richard LaPenna and her therapy sessions with Dr. Kupferberg. After trying to suggest that Tony try harder at therapy after a recent breakthrough is met with indifference, she discusses the session with Richard and Kupferberg, who both suggest that she has tried her best with Tony and recommend him to another therapist. She has defended her treatment of Tony in the past by saying that he needs her help the most, but after the recent session ended with Melfi allowing
Tony to talk about his day like normal, Melfi says, “I’ve been charmed by a sociopath!” again reflecting the position of the audience in relation to Tony. She then decides to end her sessions with Tony, reflecting the conclusion of her professional obligation to help someone in need.

As she leaves the office one night, she is raped by a man in a stairwell. The scene depicts the rape in its entirety, with Melfi’s face the focus as she cries and screams in anguish. As the rapist flees the scene, the camera switches to a wide shot, showing her splayed on the stairs, her bloodied knee, and ripped pantyhose. Melfi reports the rape to the police, yet shortly after they arrest him, the rapist is released on a technicality that the episode never fully explains. In the midsection of the episode, Melfi talks with Richard and Kupferberg, switching between breaking down and yelling in frustration. She then has a dream where there is a vending machine in her office that accepts macaroni as payment. As she bends over and reaches in to get her drink, her hand becomes trapped and the rapist appears from behind her. A Rottweiler then appears, initially scaring her but mauling the rapist as he begs for his life. Melfi decodes this dream later in a session with Kupferberg – Tony is the Rottweiler, and she can tell him where the rapist works at any time in order to enact revenge, though she says she will not in order to uphold the standards of society. In the final scene of the episode, another session with Tony, he comments on the bruises on her face, and she says she was in a car accident. Tony offers to see another therapist, but Melfi quickly says that he shouldn’t. As Tony says he had recently felt like Melfi was preparing to give him “the boot,” she breaks down and cries, making Tony come to her side of the office to comfort him. After a moment, she tells Tony to sit back down, to continue their roles as therapist and patient, not as friends. Tony asks, “You want to say something?” and Melfi calmly says, “No.” Before the final line, the camera switches between a close shot of Melfi’s
face and a mid-shot of Tony’s, and afterwards, the screen cuts to black, with ten seconds of silence before the music over the credits begin.

The final scene makes clear that Melfi does not endorse Tony’s criminality, even when it would benefit her, as she states in an earlier scene with Kupferberg that she would take great pleasure in seeing the rapist hurt. Most people in the series, men and women, accept Tony for who he is, either by participating in his criminal enterprises or by having sex with him. Melfi, by denying Tony both opportunities, positions herself in opposition to what Tony stands for, and this conflict is what drives much of their relationship. Throughout, Melfi attempts to be professional, keeping Tony’s relationship with her restricted to her office, even in her dream. Telling Tony about the rape, prompting him to seek revenge on the rapist, would have moved their relationship outside of the office, another reason that Melfi denies Tony at the end of the episode. Yet the episode shows, much like “The Suitcase,” that Melfi needs her relationship with Tony, at least in certain moments. Melfi does not accept Tony’s criminality, just as Peggy does not accept Don’s life choices, and this relationship, built on wanting the antihero to better their lives, is usually unique for the antihero.

Due to this, Tony’s time in Melfi’s office is different, because she is one of the only people to honestly critique Tony’s actions, both in coded language regarding his mob activities and his troubles with family. This requires Tony to navigate his time with Melfi differently than with anyone else, as she is one of the few characters in the series from a different walk of life than Tony. As a result, with no fear of others judging him, he can openly discuss his fears and issues, through both Melfi’s confidentiality and her detachment from the rest of the characters in the series. Because of these attributes, Tony’s scenes in Melfi’s office are often openly emotional, although they rarely result in tears – anger is a more common result.
Another version of the episode’s initial premise raises its head in the series’ penultimate episode, but this time, Melfi does not succumb to Tony’s charms and she literally closes the door on him, ending therapy when she believes he will not change. This has a significant impact of how we are meant to interpret the series. It signifies that the antihero is not all-powerful and does not win every battle – some are willing to fight him, and the characters that win are typically women, as they are able to break the antihero’s defenses in ways that do not rely on conventional, masculine power. Peggy takes Don’s job when his personal life overpowers his professional life, and Melfi has the strength to keep their relationship a professional one during treatment and to end the relationship when she sees that progress has halted.

The other relationships in Tony’s life should not be ignored, and accordingly, scholars have been writing about the strong women of *The Sopranos* for over a decade. In particular, Carmela has produced substantial conversation amongst academics who wonder if she is a feminist, a victim, or someone who is happily profiting from Tony’s crimes (McCabe and Akass 39-40). While Tony often frequents prostitutes, some of his sexual relationships are more substantial. His affair with Gloria Trillo quickly verges on violence as she asks about other women in Tony’s life, raises questions of how much his sex life is intertwined with violence and power. And Tony’s sister Janice has been romantically involved with mob men three times: one is killed by her hand, one is beaten to death by Tony, and another is killed in a mob hit, indicating how intertwined Tony’s actual family is in his mob family. Furthermore, her problematic femininity often becomes a problem for Tony’s operation, such as when he disposes of Ritchie’s body after Janice murders him (Palmer-Mehta 56-7). Tony’s daughter Meadow consistently fights against her mother and father, questioning their way of life and eventually growing into a woman who has mostly escaped from the family profession.
But perhaps Tony’s most substantial relationship with a woman is one primarily in the show’s background – his relationship with mother, Livia. David Chase’s original idea for *The Sopranos* was a mobster seeing a psychotherapist in order to work through his feelings regarding his mother, which largely made it into his final product (Vincent 122). Livia haunts Tony throughout the series as she puts out a hit on him in Season 1, and even after her death in Season 3. Much like *The Sopranos* is unique due to its insights into Tony’s mind, Livia is a unique woman because her violence is primarily psychological, which allows her power over Tony to continue for years after her death (Gething 214). For example, in Tony’s affair with Gloria, he breaks off the relationship around the time he realizes Gloria’s scheming reminds him of Livia, partially due to her use of Livia’s repeated phrase, “Poor you.” Much of Tony’s therapy, Melfi often suggests, is a result of the years of manipulation Tony suffered at the hands of Livia, and while Tony initially defends her, he eventually comes around and realizes she was a bad mother. Still, while Tony learns to deal with Livia after her death, he still suffers scars – after Melfi refuses to treat Tony, he discusses Livia to A.J.’s therapist in the series finale to raised eyebrows from those in the room. All of these relationships, which have been the subjects of feminist readings for years, disrupt Tony’s narrative, creating unique conflicts between his home life (primarily feminine) and his work life (entirely masculine).

By examining the women in *Mad Men* and *The Sopranos*, a clearer picture of the white male antihero emerges. The women in these shows often subscribe to traditional gender roles, like the mob wives in *The Sopranos*, or Don’s wives in *Mad Men*, yet the characters are often complex, asserting their agency in ways that disrupt the antihero’s narrative. While the majority of women may still be used as sex objects or sites of misogyny, there is at least one woman in the antihero’s life who allows him to express his emotions without putting his hegemonic
masculinity in jeopardy. Tellingly, this person is not a sex object to the antihero, and through her professional acuity, she actively resists the simplistic interpretation, often suggested by other men in the narrative. Through “The Suitcase,” a complex picture of Don and Peggy’s relationship emerges, at once cruel and heartfelt, but with each character essential to the other’s well being. For Peggy, the ladies room is the one place where women can open themselves up, and by the time of *The Sopranos*, that has extended to both the home, where Carmela rules, and the workplace, where Melfi controls Tony. Through Peggy and Melfi, Don and Tony are humanized further, allowing the shows to explore the antihero’s foibles in a non-sexual and emotional way. These windows into the antihero’s psyche encourage the audience’s empathy, which illustrates the ways in which gender differences can define the antihero’s life. Thus, while the men of these shows are the clear drivers of the plot, and of society, their relationships with key women function as a means to explore different facets of the antihero.
CONCLUSION

The antihero is, at his center, a morally complex character. Yet that definition fails to adequately capture his intricacies, a task that I hope this project has shed some light on. My goal in this project was to discuss intertextuality between The Sopranos and Mad Men, as I found there were many of the same themes, character types, and creative personnel in each show. But as I wrote, I found that many of these aspects are emblematic of a larger trend in television drama, one that truly began once The Sopranos finished its first season: the white male antihero. Not every aspect of this project corresponds to every white male antihero on television today, but many of the same concerns are present.

In Chapter 1, I discussed Robert Warshow’s “The Gangster as Tragic Hero” and how it correlated nicely with both Tony Soprano and Don Draper. Central to antihero dramas is the “double satisfaction” that Warshow refers to – audiences like to live vicariously through antiheroes to experience the thrill of doing dangerous activities, yet also yearn for them to be disciplined for the same reason. Shows that conclude with the antihero being punished seem to be well-received by fans, such as The Shield and Breaking Bad, while The Sopranos is relatively alone in having a planned ending and leave its antihero relatively intact. David Chase has made clear that he was not making The Sopranos for the segment of the audience who cheered on Tony’s criminal action and yet wanted to see him murdered in the finale, and audiences have made it clear, through both their anger over The Sopranos finale and their appreciation of other finales, that that is what they want. Yet the gangster goes beyond his death at the end of the story – he lives on as a symbol of the times. In the words of Brett Martin, the gangster drama questions if “the American dream might at its core be a criminal enterprise,” a thread running through nearly all antihero shows (Difficult Men 84).
In Chapter 2, I discussed the complicated masculinity of the antihero, which is often wrapped up in his lack of identity. For Tony, this manifests itself as his crisis over society losing the “strong, silent type” of man – of course, he says this while visiting with a psychiatrist, whom he regales with endless stories of his quarrelsome mother and mobster father. For Don, he attempts to reinvent himself after accidentally stealing the identity of a dead man, yet this does not allow him to completely start fresh or return to his old life. For both, masculinity is troublesome, something that must be proven at all times, yet is nearly impossible to hold on to. The biggest aspect of this project that is nearly unique to The Sopranos and Mad Men, as many antihero shows touch on the protagonist’s masculinity, but few make it a primary point of discussion. Overall, The Sopranos and Mad Men show that the time of Don Drapers and Gary Cooper is mostly gone, thankfully, and that society has entered a time where gender identity is more fluid, although men like Tony are still trying to hold on to their former privilege.

In Chapter 3, I discussed how women disrupt the narrative of the antihero, often requiring him to become more emotional in the process, which humanizes him in the eyes of the audience. This helps to balance his antiheroic actions discussed in Chapter 1, so that the antihero is not seen entirely as a villain. Matthew Weiner, commenting on what working on The Sopranos taught him, says, “Antiheroes are not controversial when they murder bad guys or whatever. But Don sleeping with Bobby Barrett…That, I’m a piece of shit feeling…You see how guilty he feels” (“Matthew Weiner Interview”). Weiner is commenting on how when Don comes home after cheating on his wife, he seems visibly embarrassed at what he did that day, and this tension between work life and home life drives many plots in The Sopranos and Mad Men. Yet the most interesting women in each of these shows are the characters whom the protagonist does not sleep with – namely, Peggy Olson and Dr. Melfi. While all antihero dramas have women who question
the antihero’s morality, few have this platonic figure, who becomes as key to understanding the antihero as the antihero himself.

The antihero drama is here to stay for the foreseeable future. Shows with main characters reminiscent of *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* have filled the landscape of what critics term quality television drama, beginning with premium networks like HBO and Showtime, moving to cable networks like FX and AMC, and even broadcast networks have begun to catch on, although the enforcement of content standards (and, perhaps, a general unwillingness to fully commit to the moral complexities of the antihero) have not led to the success of such shows on network television. Yet while antihero dramas have littered the post-*Sopranos* landscape, none have reached the mix of commercial and critical success of *The Sopranos*, and I would argue none other than *Mad Men* is specifically concerned with 21st century American masculinity in the way that the former series is. I’d like to explore the current televisual landscape to survey how these dramas are attempting to grapple with the legacy of *The Sopranos* and, to a lesser extent, *Mad Men*.

HBO continues to traffic in antihero dramas. Terence Winter, who worked on *The Sopranos* for Seasons 2 through 6, helms *Boardwalk Empire*. While the show’s protagonist, Nucky Thompson, is undoubtedly an antihero, the show is generally not concerned with the same questions that David Chase and Matthew Weiner are. Nucky does not constantly grapple with the same questions of identity that Tony and Don do, nor does his masculinity come into question. By and large, *Boardwalk Empire* takes the history of the time seriously, saying more about the origins of the gangster genre than the current state of the white male antihero. HBO’s other current dramas are more difficult to pin down. By killing its assumed hero at the end of the first season, *Game of Thrones* revels in complex morality, yet its ensemble cast makes any direct
comparisons difficult. The anthology series *True Detective* seems like a perfect fit, as there are
two complex white heroes in the lead, and each deals with his own proclivity for violence and
complex family situation. Yet writer Nic Pizzolatto has resisted the antihero label, claiming he
sees the two leads as straight heroes, and the finale of the first season supported this view
(Dekel).

Showtime, meanwhile, has largely created successes by following both Tony and Don
into the 2010s. In 2013, they launched two shows that represented each approach: first was *Ray
Donovan*, a gritty look at a fixer’s struggles with his upbringing and evading the FBI. The show
largely elicited yawns from critics, who questioned if this was one antihero show too many
(VanDerWerff). Yet later that year, *Masters of Sex* debuted to critical acclaim, which follows the
*Mad Men* formula: it is a period piece that deals with the state of modern society’s relationship
with gender and sexuality through the past, jumps months at a time with each episode, and
features at its center a genius who feels disaffected by his high place in society. Both shows were
renewed for a second season, although *Ray Donovan* consistently had better ratings, reflecting
*The Sopranos*’s wide popularity versus *Mad Men*’s comparatively low ratings.

And as discussed in my introduction, *Breaking Bad* broke through in 2013 to broad
viewership after years of critical success, including over 10 million viewers for its finale.
Meanwhile, AMC’s record-breaking *The Walking Dead* has proved to be a standout success with
audiences, while critics have been less than enthralled. Other attempts to replicate this success by
focusing on gritty dramas, like *Hell on Wheels* or *Low Winter Sun*, have failed, leading to a
*Breaking Bad* spinoff, a *Walking Dead* spinoff, and more reality programming. Clearly, not all
antihero shows are created equal.
When *The Sopranos* debuted, critics said that the show resembled a breath of fresh air, but at this point, these shows are firmly built into the televisual landscape, commodified into just another type. However, the medium continues to evolve, and so will the genre. In large part, recently, shows have kept the moral complexity but have shifted the protagonists away from white men. Netflix’s *Orange is the New Black* had a significant debut in 2013, and the cast was made up of primarily women, many of them non-white. (Although this show was helped by Netflix’s first big premiere in 2013, the white male antihero-led *House of Cards*.) FX’s *The Americans* follows two Russian spies in America that kill and terrorize innocent American citizens, yet the two leads are given equal weight in the narrative, and as such the show lacks the tension between the genders discussed in Chapter 3. This has even moved into half-hour shows, as much ink has been spilled over HBO’s *Girls*, which features an unlikable 20-something female at its center. Tellingly, all of these shows feature strong executive producers at their center and networks willing to take risks by not relying on the same character types, which accounts for their relatively new takes on a now-familiar type.

I hope future research will focus on how shows like these have critiqued the antihero formula and what that says about the state of television and the audience at large. And I do not think it can be stated enough that white male antihero shows are made in part because the people who are creating them, by and large, are white middle-aged males. What happens when a woman or person of color gets to run an hour-long drama at HBO, something that hasn’t happened since 2007 (Ryan)? This does not mean that that person needs to create a show specifically about women or people of color, and it certainly does not mean that that show will automatically be good. But it does mean that the viewing public should be aware of where their shows come from and how different viewpoints could help to create different narratives and characters.
The lasting cultural legacy of *The Sopranos* may be that Tony is, for better or worse, now a recognizable type. Academics have flocked to the show, driving Stuart Hall to say, “If I have to read another cultural studies analysis of *The Sopranos*, I give up” (Yardley). Yet that battle may have been lost long ago – critiques like this one litter television studies. This speaks to both the quality of *The Sopranos* and the influence that it still has over television today, and this perspective helps to understand why *Mad Men* has fallen into a similar situation. In the future, other towering cultural studies figures will surely complain about the myriad *Mad Men* articles still continuing to come out years after its conclusion.

The finale of *The Sopranos* stands as one of the key parts of the series – it seems as though any critic must have a stance on the meaning of the final scene before he or she is able to critique the rest of the show, as discussed in Chapter 1. The conclusion of *Mad Men* will likely be similar, whether it features Don falling out of an office window, as every episode begins (a theory Weiner has discounted), or an older Don Draper in the 1980s or 1990s reflecting on his heyday. Weiner, for his part, defends the *Sopranos* finale. Regarding fans who were dissatisfied with the final scene, he said, “They wanted closure. Which…you know what, fuck ’em. I really don’t care. I loved it” (“Matthew Weiner Interview”). In the same interview, Weiner recalled the final scene of Season 1, where the Sopranos sit down for a family dinner, and said that that scene and the series finale scene at Holsten’s represented what the show was really about – family – and said, “You can look at my show the same way. I’m sure the ending of *Mad Men* will be similar to that in some way” (“Matthew Weiner Interview”). Here, Weiner openly embraces the comparison between *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men*, reflecting the former’s important influence on the latter. And the media and fans are also anxious to find out about *Mad Men*’s ending – Weiner is often asked what the ending will look like, and he says he thought up a final image for the
show in the hiatus between Seasons 4 and 5 (Sepinwall, “Final Season”). Yet, the ending’s comparison to *The Sopranos* is inevitable – *Entertainment Weekly* and *The Hollywood Reporter* have interpreted Weiner’s comments over time differently, with one report declaring that *Mad Men*’s ending won’t be ambiguous like *The Sopranos* and another saying that Weiner thrives in ambiguity and life often goes without resolution (Franich; Tabrys).

*The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* have been discussed at great length over their runs, and this discussion will continue long past their conclusions. David Chase and Matthew Weiner are often asked about each other, and if the debate over *Mad Men*’s ending is any clue, the two shows will be linked together in the minds of the audience. And if this project has succeeded, then the intertextual link between the two creators and the two shows should be obvious, as they comment on America’s need for the tragic white male antihero, a man who represents the changing role of the American man as he deals with his own identity and complex women in his life. The link between the two characters is not the only important connection – the link between the two creators and the two shows is not likely to go away in the future either.
WORKS CITED


