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MAD MEN: LOOKING BACK IN WONDER

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ABSTRACT. ***Mad Men: Looking Back in Wonder.*** This study focuses on the literary roots of the popular television series *Mad Men*, namely Sloan Wilson's 1955 novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and Richard Yates 1961 debut novel *Revolutionary Road*, and on the genuine dialogue in which they engage at the level of character portrayal and argument. Their intertextual triangle offers an illustrative example of cultural recycling and re-contextualizing of 1960's domestic and professional dilemmas for a twenty-first century medium and public. The success and longevity of *Mad Men* are raised upon the constant appeal of this tumultuous decade for contemporary audiences and capitalize on the universality of the issues it foregrounded.

Keywords: *cultural dialogue, intertextuality, the 1960s, domestic culture, gender roles, melodrama, tragedy.*

REZUMAT. ***Mad Men: cu privirea peste umăr.*** Acest studiu analizează rădăcinile literare ale popularului serial de televiziune *Mad Men*, şi anume romanul lui Sloan Wilson *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) şi cel de debut al lui Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (1961), şi dialogul lor la nivelul portretizării personajelor şi al argumentului general. Acest triunghi intertextual oferă un exemplu de reciclare culturală şi de recontextualizare a dilemelor profesionale şi domestice ale anilor '60, pentru un public şi un medium de reprezentare din secolul al XXI-lea. Succesul şi longevitatea serialului se bazează pe fascinaţia pe care o exercită această furtunoasă decadă asupra audienţei contemporane şi valorifică universalitatea problematicilor avansate.

***Cuvinte-cheie**: dialog cultural, intertextualitate, anii '60, cultură domestică, roluri de gen, melodramă, tragedie.*

Like most clichés, the term 'American Dream' has come to denote almost everything and nothing at the same time and, occasionally, to connote

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diametrically opposed notions. Historical, social and cultural forces have molded what was once thought of as the United States national ethos into various avatars which, nevertheless, maintain a certain degree of resemblance with the original matrix, whose defining characteristic is the idea of liberty and individual agency.

Home ownership and life in the suburbia have been considered the dream of every American in the post-World War II era. The television series *Mad Men* rehearses this topic extensively and revises it for a 21st-century audience. This study analyzes the popular television drama as a re-reading of previous literary works on the emerging corporate culture of the 1960's, such as *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *Revolutionary Road*, with an emphasis on how the series reflects the iconic portrayal of domestic relations and gender roles.

The 2008 film adaptation of the 1962 novel *Revolutionary Road* and the popular *Mad Men* TV series speak eloquently for the relevance of the 1960's and the cultural constructs associated with this decade for contemporary audiences. This paper sets out to delineate the cultural legacy of fictional literary couples such as the Raths and the Wheelers for the Drapers and aims at disentangling the woman's voice from the seemingly harmonic domestic duets of 1960's American suburbia and their echoes in today's popular imagination.

Mad Men, the contemporary bellwether in popular portrayals of an almost mythical era, induces all sorts of cultural déjà vu-s. The show's rich inter-textual dimension unfolds in several directions. For me, the first and most striking allusion the series sustains is the dialogue it engages in with literary predecessors, two classic American novels and their screen adaptations: *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *Revolutionary Road*. This fictional triangle constitutes the best example of what David Fishelov refers to as "dialogic fiction." I prefer his term, 'dialogic,' to Julia Kristeva's more generic concept, 'intertextual,' because the former is more descriptive and because it allows for a better, more generous understanding of a work's canonicity, based on the idea that "the way for a book to build its reputation as a great book is by inspiring many and diverse types of literary, artistic, and critical dialogues." (Fishelov 340) This theoretical viewpoint is detached from both the integral subjectivity of the aesthetic school and the built-in relativism of the different schools of Marxism, yet it reconciles the two major critical traditions which explain canon formation, by stressing the importance of the inspiring source-text, namely its inherent, aesthetic merits, and by placing great emphasis on the historical and social circumstances in which a work is produced, received, criticized and, generally, engaged with. (Fishelov 348-349)

As in real life, dialogues between and among books may take the form of "genuine" or "pseudo" conversations, depending on the nature of their exchange. (Fishelov 336) When the responding text refracts the original text in a creative way, the result is a genuine dialogue. The purpose of my paper is to determine the way in

which *Mad Men* engages its literary precursors at the level of its portrayal of middle-class domesticity and whether or not their exchange is an imaginative one.

My interpretive bet does not rest on grounds of authorial intent, I am not interested in the influence the creators of *Mad Men* have or have not acknowledged with regards to such literary and film landmarks as *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *Revolutionary Road*. Instead, my analysis follows the narrative threads and character development in the two novels and respective features and builds on Umberto Eco's model of reception and his trust that the ultimate and most reliable basis for comprehension and interpretation lies at the intersection of the text's and the reader's intention. (Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* 3) That creative crossroads is rife with multiple readings, which, individually, can do justice to an interpretive possibility, and, collectively form the interpretive aura or potential for interpretation of a given text. (Eco, *The Role of the Reader. Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* 58-59)

The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit (1955) starts off to probe the troubles of a young couple in suburban Connecticut in the mid-1950s and ends on an anticlimactic note, by diagnosing their crisis as a case of universal malaise, a passing fit that couples everywhere experience only to come out of it stronger and more aware of themselves and of the challenges marriage entails. Tom and Betsy Rath have been married for seven years, have three children and live in a house they have both grown to dislike and neglect tacitly. Tom works at the Schanenhauser Foundation and Betsy is a housewife. He doesn't particularly like the job his grandmother secured him and she complains that their income doesn't cover their growing family needs and that their marriage isn't "fun" anymore. When the opportunity for a better job arises, Betsy urges her husband to seize it. Meanwhile, she embarks on a real estate adventure once Tom's grandmother dies and they inherit her mansion and surrounding land. Tom's new position at the United Broadcasting Corporation pays better, but comes with a looming threat attached: his worst fear of becoming yet another "gray flannel suit" is gnawing at him with every day he spends with the president, Mr. Hopkins, working on speeches and proposals for a national mental health project in which he has no interest. Things get complicated when a chance meeting with a war buddy reveals to him the existence of a son from a brief, yet intense affair he had with an Italian young woman, when he was stationed in Rome during the war. Tom's already shaken marriage suffers a blow, but survives due to his honesty and Betsy's understanding, while his professional life improves, too, due to his boss' acceptance that his first and foremost commitment lies with his family. Finally, the lawsuit Tom's grandmother's butler brought upon the Raths proves the former to be a charlatan and opens the way for Betsy's entrepreneurial spirit. All's well that ends well. In other words, problem diagnosed, palliative administered, case closed, audience happy.

Revolutionary Road (1961) reopens the case shortly after *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* was turned into a movie, in 1956. In contrast to its predecessor, it showcases the wife in the lead role as coagulator of energies and provider of solutions to her own problems and the couple's marital deadlock. Whereas in Wilson's novel the woman's escape from a Levittown community, where she finds everybody and everything to be "dull," is into an upper middle class suburb, in Yates' domestic drama, the wife plans a major relocation for her family, from suburban Connecticut to Paris, assumes the breadwinner's role as potential secretary in NATO's French headquarters and grants her husband the luxury of discovering a grand purpose for himself. Only that her plan is predicated on the bovaric assumption that their presence in the Revolutionary Road residential development represents a condescending concession they were making to their times and a temporary detour on their way to a different, i.e. special existence.

The book was short-listed for the National Book Award in 1962, but lost to *The Moviegoer* and it was not until 2008 that a screen adaptation was finally made possible. The film met with relatively positive reviews, which speaks for the importance of its topic as well as for its capacity to translate and externalize a rather unconventional narrative style. The acute perceived feeling of being trapped in a predetermined social pattern with no possibility of ever being able to escape is what sparks the Wheelers' wish to trade their comfortable suburbanite existence for a bohemian life in Paris. April's enthusiasm is catching and the couple lives in total bliss for a while, until the hard reality of a new unwanted pregnancy and Frank's hesitations interrupt it violently. April dies trying to perform her own abortion, Frank, a shattered man, moves to the city and dedicates his life to the upbringing of his two children, while a new couple moves into 115 Revolutionary Road. The Wheelers' alternative dream seems to have succumbed to the all-American suburbanite ideal, except that this conclusion is invalidated by the silent dramas the other unhappy inhabitants of the same community are experiencing with false dignity. Taking the thematic thrusts of its easily recognizable literary precedent a step forward, *Revolutionary Road* adds a tragic dimension to the melodramatic reconciliation-as-resistance which the predecessors' protagonists put up against the conformity of middle-class American way of life.

April invests her husband with qualities he has never possessed because it gives her the illusion that she has traded an artistic career for an equally exceptional destiny. She fails, ironically enough, when it comes to acting out the escapist script she has dreamed up. She crumbles under the act she has to keep putting up although she detests the role in which she has been cast by society and by her initial conformist choices. *Revolutionary Road* opens with the amateur performance of Robert Sherwood's 1935 play *The Petrified Forest*, which turns into a fiasco. April, who has the leading part, takes things personally, as a reminder of her failure as a professional actress. The play within the novel narrative strategy constitutes, in my opinion, an embedded interpretive

suggestion for an informed audience. The story in *Revolutionary Road* begins to unfold in 1955, the same year when the live televised version *The Petrified Forest* was released. Inevitably, this structural detail casts a long shadow over April's development as a character. April identifies with Gabrielle, the protagonist in Sherwood's play, to such an extent that her whole plan to escape to Paris echoes that character's destiny and could be interpreted as April's effort to make ontological amends for her interpretive excessive pathos on the premiere night. Gabrielle's ticket from a Great Depression décor set in an Arizona small town to Paris is Alan Squire's life insurance. When gangster Duke Mantee takes them and a couple of other people hostages, Alan, a disillusioned British artist turned alcoholic drifter, who empathizes with Gabrielle's wish to go to France and study fine arts, makes the young woman the beneficiary of his life insurance and urges the gangster to kill him, so that her dream could finally come true. Alan dies in Gabrielle's arms, content that his death made hers worth living. In a classic case of bovaric transference, April assumes Gabrielle's destiny. When her plan to move to Paris is canceled by an unwanted pregnancy and Frank's hesitation, she, too, finds her way out at the cost of someone's life: her own. Her suicide represents a silent admittance of her helplessness and the ultimate proof that she called the shots right until the end and wrote herself into a pre-existing script.

The basic structural difference between the *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *Revolutionary Road* lies at the level of narrative structure and character development. While Wilson's novel is raised on a melodramatic pattern, Yates' novel is informed by tragedy as a forma mentis.

Melodrama favors „whole" individuals. Their high self-esteem and assertiveness ensures them a leader's position from the beginning. The obstacles and trials they are presented with only reinforce their optimism and decisive actions. Their goals will be achieved through a constantly exercised strong will. This is Tom Rather's and, to a certain extent, Don Draper's case. By comparison, tragic heroes alienate themselves from the community because of the inner dilemmas they experience. Their conflicting desires and interests turn them into vulnerable human beings who cannot cope with challenging, extreme situations to which they eventually succumb. In other words, "in tragedy the conflict is within man; in melodrama it is between men, or between men and things." (Heilman 79) This is April's and, apparently, Frank's case.

The generic couple in *Mad Men* tends to replicate Sloan Wilson's scenario. When material comfort and the illusion of a perfect marriage cannot fill Betty's inner void and she stumbles over Don's secret lives, her reflex is not to pursue a career for herself, which her husband had clearly denied her, but to seek and find refuge in the arms of an influent man. Betty is a slight replica to Betsy, her only awakening is to Don's inability to fit her idealistic husband mold and to put another man on the same pedestal. Don, on the other hand, has more in common with April than with either Tom or Frank. He works in the advertising business, he is one of

the commuters wearing gray flannel suits, but he conforms from a position of power. Not only is he a master creator and seller of images, in a time when American dreams were morphing into illusions, but he also manages to pass his own illusory identity as reality to a considerable number of people and for a considerably long period of time. When his wife finds out that his real name is Dick Whitman and that he has taken up someone else's name to escape a haunting childhood and build a whole new life and a traumatizing war experience, she leaves him. When Bert Cooper, his boss and senior partner at Cooper-Sterling, is tipped off about Don's shady past, he doesn't seem to care: Don is too talented as creative director to dispense with him simply because he is not who he says he is. After all, this is his job, he deals in images, his own included, as it turns out. Living the life he has designed for himself is Don's top-notch pitch and he pursues this goal ruthlessly, at the cost of driving his younger step brother to kill himself. In this, he is reminiscent of April's determination to carve out a whole new life for herself and her family. He loses his family, nevertheless, but not himself.

With respect to the portrayal of the suburbanite couple, *Mad Men* relegates the wife to the position of silent witness to her own everyday life, confronting "the problem that has no name" day in day out, and foregrounds the man as lead actor in an atypical melodrama.

The melodramatic ending may take three forms which determine the type of gratification the audience experiences: most frequently, the hero wins and saves the world; alternatively, the conflict may be tied and the only resolution at hand resides in the continuation of the struggle until one force prevails over the other; finally and a-typically, the villain may be the winner. Irrespective of the outcome, the public enjoys "the pleasure of experiencing wholeness—not the troublesome, uneasy wholeness that exists when all of one's divergent motives remain within the field of consciousness, nor the rare integration of powers that may be earned by long discipline, but rather the sensation of wholeness that is created when one responds with a single impulse or potential which functions as if it were his whole personality." (Heilman 82-84) The prospect of a clear-cut tone, be it positive, negative or undecided, is what guarantees the popularity of melodramatic scenarios. The audience can only react in a predictable manner and experience safe emotions, the sum of which can best be described as a "monopathy" or "the singleness of feeling that gives one the sense of wholeness." (Heilman 85)

Undeniably, the monopathic response is triggered automatically by happy endings. Contrary to one's expectations, the other two alternatives afford and engender monopathy as well because a stalemate has the potential of ongoing struggle against all odds, which is nothing but a replica to real life situations, and the prevalance of evil induces pity for the hero and, through identification, self-pity. The common denomintor of the three types of melodramatic endings is the

unity of emotional response. In other words, "the approval of victory easily expands into the delights of self-congratulation, and sadness for the defeated glides gently into the melancholy pleasures of self-pity." (Heilman 87)

The ending of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* shows the Raths reconciled with each other and the world around and set up for a "happily ever after" type of conclusion. The monopathic gratification which readers are expected to experience is even dramatized before their eyes, as if there were any doubt as to what thoughts and feelings the story left them with. Judge Bernstein, who has just informed Tom that the suit against him has been dropped, watches Tom meet Betsy, break the good news to her and drive her off to Vermont, i.e. into the sun. Betsy's smile is catching; Bernstein smiles, too, from a distance and upon the couple's newly rediscovered commitment. Society has embraced and absorbed them once again and they, in turn, have pledged allegiance again to each other and to a socially sanctioned way of life, admittedly in their own way. And so is the audience expected to do.

Revolutionary Road on the other hand, ends in silence. As in the case of most classical and Shakespearean tragedy, those who survive are bound to tell the story of those who died. The cleansing function of storytelling is dramatized in Yates' novel as well. Two of the secondary characters, both women, cannot help but remind their family over and over again of the Wheelers' unfortunate destiny, in what becomes a gratuitous, reassuring refrain about them being alive and well. Both Milly and Mrs. Givings lose their audience, i.e their husbands' attention, simply because theirs was a suburban development that "had not been designed to accommodate a tragedy." (Yates 442) Howard Givings' discrete reaction to turn off his hearing aid and surround himself in "a thunderous sea of silence" represents the objective correlative of the community's deafness to the true and tragic dimension of April's final gesture and a metanarrative comment on the contemporary readers' own possible response to the novel.

Despite its apparent simplicity, the melodramatic mode has won over the tragic one in contemporary popular culture because "we see most of the serious conflicts and crises of our everyday lives in melodramatic rather than tragic terms." (Smith 10) We choose to package our experiences as melodramas rather than tragedies because we relate to heroes through not only sympathy, but, possibly more important, through empathy. We are intimidated by tragic heroes, because of their disconnectedness from our day-to-day lives. The scenarios they act out echo scriptural commandmens, i.e. they teach us how not to deal with the world. The tragic catharsis is intellectual or artistic, if one can afford it, at best. Hence the viewer is condemned to a disciple's position in perpetuity.

By contrast, melodrama teaches affirmative lessons, delivers unquestionable messages through complete individuals; it encourages viewers to

identify with the characters and to invest personally in their morally defined struggles. Whereas tragedy reduces the audience to a pretext and a mere formal necessity, melodrama empowers the audience by making it a partner in staging a credible real life situation. We relate to melodramatic protagonists, but are in awe of tragic heroes.

Mad Men represents an atypical melodrama, because, while the male protagonist has the depth of a tragic hero, he remains at one with himself, unshaken by hostile events, and because the conflict between Don and Betty Draper ends in a realistic draw. Even though *Mad Men* does not recycle Wilson's overly optimistic narrative solution, nor does it embrace Yates' extremely dark conclusion, it meets both precursors somewhere in the middle: it tailors the gray flannel suit to address the expectations of a twenty-first century audience and places viewers on the road to rediscovering the 1950s turn into the 1960s: quite a revolutionary endeavor.

To conclude, *Mad Men* engages in a meaningful dialogue with both *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *Revolutionary Road* and the result is a fresh and multi-faceted reevaluation of the 1960s for a twenty-first century audience.

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