Giving Up, Settling Down:  
*Mad Men, The Sopranos*, and Professional Class Marriage

by

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Preface

The decades surrounding the turn of the millennium were a time of passionate debate over family, marriage, and parenting, the conditions of which I examine in chapter 1. Many Americans lamented the disappearance of a “traditional” middle class way of life that they recognized in the idealized image of the postwar family. In the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century, the professional class in particular turned to family and marriage with high expectations, but they were often disappointed by the inequalities and frustrations that characterized these institutions, particularly for women. Faced with this contradiction, these adults grew to value compromise in their family lives, as the limitations of marriage seemed unavoidable.

In chapter 2, I look at a process that was occurring simultaneously in the television industry. In the 1990s, the cable industry perfected a business model that encouraged the creation of complex programming, which could remain economically viable by attracting a small but valuable niche audience. This type of programming situated itself as an alternative to the mass appeal of broadcast networks and appealed to particularly wealthy and educated viewers.

As cable programs that aired around the turn of the millennium, The Sopranos and Mad Men were situated at the intersection of these developments in family life and the television industry. Chapters 3 and 4 present a narrative analysis of these programs, which were overwhelmingly concerned with the familial issues affecting the professional class. I consider the ways in which the artistic and narrative choices of The Sopranos and Mad Men engaged the professional class by dramatizing and undermining the tensions and contradictions that they faced at home each day.
I am indebted to many people for their help and support with this project.

Thank you to the American Studies department, for the freedom to write a thesis that doesn’t fit neatly into one discipline. And to Professor Betsy Traube, whose course on television storytelling inspired me to pursue this topic.

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I’d like to thank my parents for their support; for not getting upset when I wouldn’t answer my phone for days at a time; and most of all, for sending me to Wesleyan (all without threats, ricotta pies, or murdering former associates during college visits).

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“The private revolution has barely begun”¹: The Postwar Family Ideal and the Professional Class, 1990-2010

“Out there it’s the 1990s,” Tony Soprano explains to his children in the first season of *The Sopranos*, “but in this house it’s 1954.”² At first glance Tony’s assessment seems quite fitting. Within the exceedingly decorated walls of the sprawling suburban Soprano house lives Tony, a professional working hard to provide for his family; Carmela, the housewife who fills her days discussing books and movies with her friends, talking to her priest, and becoming involved in her kids’ activities; Meadow, the moody, sarcastic and intelligent teenager; and A.J., who may lack his sister’s smarts, but compensates with football talent. The Sopranos seem to be the paragon of the American middle class family life that was consistently glorified at the end of the 20th century.

*Mad Men* returns to an era when this image of the American family originated and flourished, centering on the Drapers in early 1960s suburban New York City. The pilot episode follows Don, a successful creative director at an advertising agency, through one exhausting day at Sterling Cooper. But after 45 minutes of dealing with obnoxious employees and demanding clients, Don leaves the city behind and returns

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² “Nobody Knows Anything,” Season 1 Episode 11.
to his wife Betty, a Grace Kelly lookalike in a pristine white nightgown, and his two children, Sally and Bobby, peacefully asleep side-by-side in their twin beds.³

But the family life depicted on each of these television programs isn’t quite as effortless as it seems. The traditional values that contemporary society views as intrinsically connected to these middle class, male-breadwinner families become almost immediately convoluted. Tony Soprano declares his desire for a return to the postwar ideal within his home, but he finances this home, and this lifestyle, with mob money from a strip club and other tawdry schemes. And with his talk of the 1950s, he doesn’t seem to understand the irony that his own childhood during this time was exceedingly bleak, with his often absent father and volatile mother. When Don returns home to his adoring wife in Ossining, he neglects to tell her that his busy workday in the city included a stop at his bohemian mistress’s apartment in the Village, a visit that included Don saying to the woman, post-coital and half-joking, “We should get married.” With Don Draper, there’s also the small detail that his entire identity is a fabrication—a fact that he neglects to tell to the wife with whom he shares his stolen last name. So much for simple family values.

*The Sopranos*, created and produced by David Chase, ran from 1999 to 2007 on HBO, and throughout its six seasons the series grew steadily in popularity and acclaim, quickly becoming a cultural phenomenon. As the first cable series to obtain larger audience ratings than its competitors on broadcast networks, the show managed to appeal to both popular and elite viewers.⁴ After the first season finished its run, one *New York Times* critic described the series as “fresh and provocative” in its

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³ “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,” Season 1 Episode 1.
fascination with “the temper of American life, especially with the hypocrisies that go unrecognized,” while another retrospectively compared the series in its entirety to the publication of *Ulysses* in its contribution to an “aesthetic paradigm shift.” Meanwhile, viewers across the nation gathered in their living rooms for *Sopranos* viewing parties, sitting down to watch the mob hit over heaping dishes of spaghetti and meatballs that would make Artie Bucco proud.

In fact, enthusiasts could even cook Artie’s exact recipe if they purchased *The Soprano Family Cookbook*, which gave a “compiled by” credit to the unstable culinary character. The cookbook was only one of over twenty books to be published about the program during and after its run, ranging from those that directly examine the show and its subject matter (like *The Sopranos and Philosophy: I Kill Therefore I Am*), to books whose contents have a more tenuous relationship to the show (*Leadership Sopranos Style: How to Become a More Effective Boss*). The image of Tony surrounded by the members of his two families became so recognizable to the public over the show’s run that Animal Planet chose to do a take-off of this image in its advertisements for *Meerkat Manor* in 2007. “The Family is Back” one poster declares, while another proclaims “Tony’s out. Flower’s in.” Both make use of the familiar red block letters against a black background, and both depict a group of meerkats grouped together, staring gravely out at the viewer, just as the characters are often portrayed on DVD covers and promotional materials for *The Sopranos*. The appropriation of the mob lifestyle by a show about rodents is certainly clever. But

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more importantly, it points to the way the style and iconography of The Sopranos had so thoroughly permeated popular consciousness that advertisers could rely on audiences to immediately recognize these indirect allusions to the show.

Mad Men, created and produced by Sopranos writer and eventual executive producer Matthew Weiner, debuted on AMC in 2007, just a month after The Sopranos’ series finale. In Mad Men’s first three seasons it similarly captivated the public, evident among other ways in the program’s collaboration with the retailer Banana Republic, the publication of the first book centered around the series (Jesse McClean’s Kings of Madison Avenue), and the trend of online discussion and dissection of recent episodes that appeared on various websites, from the well-established Slate and Salon to pop-culture-obsessed Entertainment Weekly to the feminist blog Feministing.

Most interestingly though, Mad Men was frequently described by the press in terms of its relation to The Sopranos, with some critics describing Don Draper as Tony Soprano’s worthy heir and others dismissing the series as a weaker version of the HBO favorite. These comparisons can be attributed in part to the fact that Matthew Weiner wrote for both shows and that the two series garnered similar critical acclaim. But more importantly, despite their differences in subject, setting, and tone, the two programs are formally and thematically similar in a variety of ways. As long-form, serial, fictional narratives, they each follow the interactions of multiple characters over episodes and seasons, creating extensive and overlapping social

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worlds. Each program dramatizes specific forms of status competition and their accompanying anxieties. While the functions of the workplace on each program are certainly distinct, both the mafia family and the advertising agency serve a similar dramatic purpose, providing a relatively self-contained environment of masculine competition based on clear rules and established practices.

More precisely, and most significantly, *Mad Men* and *The Sopranos* each use these situations to depict and subvert the image of the idealized postwar family. And it is through this “traditional” family that each program is able to explore many of the complicated issues relating to gender and marriage that came to be ubiquitous in American cultural discourse around the turn of the millennium. The Sopranos and the Drapers do indeed evoke the type of *Leave it to Beaver* or *Father Knows Best* family that permeated American television in the 1950s and early 1960s, but this is done with an incredible level of self-reflexivity and self-consciousness. Consequently, the programs are able to reflect on the long-term changes in gender and family life that became particularly prominent and polarizing in the 1990s and early 2000s by wrestling with issues that June Cleaver couldn’t have even imagined.

As viewers, we watch as Betty frequently acts cold and indifferent toward Sally and Bobby; as Don comes home and treats his children with care and love, but treats his wife like a child. We see Tony shift from having a heart-to-heart with his daughter to brutally strangling a man to death; we see Carmela devote herself to her children’s’ intellectual and cultural development while simultaneously helping Tony to sustain their middle class lifestyle through immoral means. We watch as the
marriages and families that we’ve come to know over seasons and years slowly and painfully come apart at the seams.

These shows emerged at a very particular moment in American culture, in reaction to the discussion of gender, family, work, and childrearing in the 1990s and early 21st century. Tensions and anxieties about the private lives of American families established an unprecedented centrality in public and private discourse during these years. *The Sopranos* debuted in the midst of the Clinton impeachment scandal, which emerged as one of the most obvious manifestations of the public controversy over sexuality and marriage that had saturated cultural conversation throughout the Clinton administration. *Mad Men* premiered just a few years after the Bush administration announced its plan to combat poverty by helping impoverished Americans build healthy, stable marriages—a culmination of the trend since the ‘90s extolling the virtues of “traditional” marital and childrearing practices.8 These more public cases enacted on a large scale what was occurring in the transformation of attitudes and behaviors among many Americans—a transformation that, though less immediately visible, was both widespread and influential during these years.

“*Culture Wars*” and the Idealization of the Postwar Family

In the 1990s and into the first decade of the 21st century, many Americans became increasingly preoccupied with the legacy of the cultural revolutions of the 1960s and ‘70s and with the topic of gender, sexuality and family in the wake of the ascendency of the New Right. The prominent cultural discourse became increasingly

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panicked and divisive as the so-called “culture wars” began in the early 1990s. This national phenomenon seemed to appear suddenly when Dan Quayle gave his now infamous *Murphy Brown* speech, but its origins can be found in the conflict the US faced as it transitioned from the ostensibly calm postwar era into the 1960s.9

In the 1950s, historian Peter Filene explains, “to be born into the middle class meant to travel a life course that divided into two lanes, each marked by a different gender sign.”10 Even so, the idyllic traditional American family was as much a culturally constructed image in the 1950s as it was fifty years later. Despite the image of the postwar family that was widely held toward the end of the century, the postwar era included many working women, divorces for unhappy couples, and exceptions to the male-breadwinner, female-homemaker family model. Nevertheless, the ideology of gendered division of labor and the glorification of this family model certainly had a hold over a large part of the nation in the 1950s and early 1960s.11

These structures and beliefs were dissected and subjected to much scrutiny in the 1960s and ’70s. The actions taken by feminists and activists, along with the adjustment of the general public to changing economic circumstances, began to break down the strict gender divisions that had previously defined the familial and professional lives of many Americans. During the height of these cultural revolutions, and in their immediate aftermath, it seemed as if their actions had succeeded in the upheaval of these established norms. Individual choice appeared to take precedence

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over adherence to wider cultural norms. Women continued to enter the work force, more and more couples chose divorce over unhappy marriages, cohabitation was becoming widely accepted and, despite highly publicized men’s movements that portrayed men as lost without a clearly defined masculine role, there seemed to be a “quiet acceptance of gender equality” among most American men.\textsuperscript{12}

However, due to the lack of a single accepted model of gender behavior and family life in the decades flanking the turn of the millennium, the sense of surety that had supposedly surrounded these issues grew increasingly confused. Within their personal lives, many men and women struggled with the reality that masculinity and femininity were no longer clearly defined boundaries that could dictate their daily life and decision-making. This time period also saw changes in the way parents chose to raise their children and in the characteristics of the population to whom marriage most appealed. In 2009 many people celebrated the landmark statistic that for the first time in American history, women made up half of the workforce.\textsuperscript{13} But while this statistic indicated that women had become an established part of the American workforce, working mothers were growing increasingly frustrated by the failure of government and professional institutions to address their needs. As the generation of cultural revolt grew older and the postwar period seemed to be further entrenched in America’s past, neither the traditional conservative values of the ‘50s, nor the radical ideology of the ‘70s seemed to fully establish itself as the nation’s predominant ideological outlook. Instead, a more general environment of conflict and uncertainty

\textsuperscript{12} Michael Kimmel, “Has a Man’s World Become a Woman’s Nation?” \textit{The Shriver Report: A Woman’s Nation Changes Everything}, ed. Heather Boushey and Ann O’Leary (Maria Shriver and the Center for American Progress, 2009), 344.

\textsuperscript{13} John D. Podesta, preface in \textit{The Shriver Report} (see note 11), i.
reigned, as Americans rose to defend various competing ideologies and norms, resulting in a noisy and often fiery national dispute.

The same feminist ideology that was in part reflected in the behavior and attitudes of men and women across the country also incited evangelical Christians to enter the realm of politics by placing sexual issues at the center of national conversation. Cultural conservatives largely dominated the culture wars of the 1980s and ‘90s, blaming feminism and liberalism for the “decline” of the United States, and decrying what they saw as an increasingly decadent and irresponsible popular culture. Despite the reality that these conservative beliefs didn’t seem to succeed in reversing larger societal trends, they did succeed in shaping various policy battles and attracted ongoing national attention. And while many voices dissented from this conservative opinion, many prominent liberal politicians and intellectuals responded by finding a version of truth in conservative complaints. The family values debate focused on the importance of the nuclear family to American culture, which allowed for blame to be placed prominently on the feminists whose fight for gender equality appeared to render the “traditional” American family obsolete.

One of the major effects of the culture wars of the ‘90s was to make one’s sexuality, as opposed to one’s economic, intellectual, or political life, the primary question of public moral judgment. As family historian Stephanie Coontz points out, the conditions of morality expressed by the leaders of the family values movement were so vague that “by this definition Mafiosa families could place high on the list of moral exemplars. After all, who believes more firmly in (female) premarital virginity,

15 Patterson, 272.
marital permanence, and taking care of one’s own?”16 While The Sopranos didn’t enter our popular vocabulary until 1999, Coontz’s 1997 evaluation of family values already resonates with the issues the show would come to represent just a few years later.

During the 1990s, many intellectuals, journalists, politicians, and writers shared a broad interest in traditional social institutions, developing a fascination with the image of sexual morality and gender norms associated with the postwar era. Hoping to keep the virtues of traditional marriage and parenting in the public eye, socially conservative political theorists and sociologists founded privately funded think tanks like The Institute for American Values in 1987 and The National Marriage Project in 1997. Many writers and intellectuals turned to the topic of suburbanization for inspiration, specifically the contradictory relationship this phenomenon had with the civic virtues that mid-century middle class neighborhoods were built upon, both depending on these community bonds and destroying them. Viewing these 1950s communities as representative of a lost golden age, writers like Robert Putnam (in the influential Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community), Henry Louis Gates (in his memoir Colored People), Alan Ehrenhalt (in The Lost City: The Forgotten Virtues of Community in America), and Philip Roth (in his “American trilogy”) lamented the disappearance of a traditionally middle class way of life that ostensibly balanced personal responsibility with community values.

Simultaneously, this era saw the establishment of a market for a similar lament about what was lost during the 1960s and ‘70s, but with an added interest in

gender and family specifically. Post-feminist cultural criticism flourished, as a cohort of women writers polemically and vividly expressed variations of an essentially conservative complaint about how family and gender had changed since the postwar period. These decades were a time when respected publications such as *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic* provided a platform for writers like Katie Roiphe, Caitlin Flanagan, and Sandra Tsing Loh to express their convictions.

In a 2009 essay, for example, Roiphe criticized feminists who “emphasized the difficulty, the drudgery of new motherhood,” and described her own love for her newborn as a “narcotic,” and her maternity leave as “the vacation to end all vacations.”\(^1\) Flanagan described her own childhood as taking place in a time “before housewifery was understood to be an inherently oppressive state, before a marriage soured was a marriage abandoned; this was a time when thrift and economy were still the cornerstones of middle-class American life.”\(^2\) Sandra Tsing Loh contrasted the early 21\(^{st}\) century “transformation of men and women into domestic co-laborers,” in which “the Art of the Wife is fast disappearing,” with her recurring fantasy of 1950s family life. “When [Brad] returns from work at 6 p.m.,” she dreams, “aside from a savory roast with mashed potatoes, his homemaker wife, Nancy, has pipe, slippers and a tray of Manhattans ready.”\(^3\) In this fantasy, Sandra Tsing Loh imagines herself not as Nancy, but as Brad, yet even her reversal of gender norms remains consistent with the general lament for what that was lost in the years since the postwar era.

\(^2\) Caitlin Flanagan, *To Hell With All That: Loving and Loathing Our Inner Housewife* (New York: Little Brown, 2006), 204.
Though these writers expressed their beliefs in distinct ways, this general preoccupation with traditional family life indicates the importance of this issue to social and political life during these years. Even many liberal thinkers, though they may have found the post-feminist writers’ style or proposed solutions divergent from their own ideology, often admitted at least the partial validity of these women’s complaint against the implications of modern family life.

Stephanie Coontz, particularly in *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, serves as one parallel but alternate voice in the discussion of the postwar family in the ‘90s. Reacting against any idealization of this particular family model, she emphasizes the often-ignored reality that the so-called “traditional” family of the 1950s was, in fact, a “historical fluke.”\(^{20}\) She notes that the gender roles that defined the “traditional” family were “far from natural and have not always existed.”\(^{21}\) Her work illuminates the cultural confusion that typified ideas about family life the early ‘90s not only because of her analysis of the postwar family, but also because of the attention she gives to the complicated relationship modern Americans have with the extensive changes brought about in the decades that separate their own lives from the 1950s. For example, Coontz notes that while an overwhelming majority of women “declared that the women’s movement had helped them become more independent,” still “many women . . . accepted a rewriting of history that attributes most changes in women’s roles and family life to the influence of ‘nontraditional values’ promulgated by feminism.”\(^{22}\)

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 43.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 150.
With its emphasis on the problematic idealization of the postwar family in American politics and cultural discourse toward the end of the 20th century, Coontz’s work can be understood most productively as one scholar’s reaction to this transformation of American values. But it’s important to recognize that the ideology of family values and the pervasive discussion of morality and sexuality that proliferated during these years, although based on many historical misconceptions, still had clear effects on American family life. Some intellectuals, including Coontz, believed that the male breadwinner family would never again gain the national cultural ascendency it once had. But, as one journalist succinctly explained as the first decade of the 21st century came to a close, “at its core, this is a fight that plays out within homes and between partners.” While it’s true that “the public revolution” of the ‘60s and ‘70s remained “unfinished . . . the private revolution” being fought in American homes had “barely begun.”23

In a Rockefeller/Time poll conducted in September 2009 and reported and analyzed in The Shriver Report, a study of the state of the American woman, men and women were asked about their work and family life. While the study’s introduction optimistically declared that “A Woman’s Nation Changes Everything” and that “the battle of the sexes is over,” the poll reveals that 51% of women and 56% of men agreed that it was better for a family if the father worked outside the home and the mother took care of the children. And when presented with the fact that 30% of

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23 Friedman.
children were raised in a family without a stay-at-home parent, 65% of Americans expressed their belief that this had a negative effect on society.\textsuperscript{24}

These two statistics alone convey the extent to which the romanticized image of the 50s family, and the distinct gender roles that accompanied it, had become a vision of stability for a society increasingly characterized both by individual choice, and by the general acceptance of moral judgment directed at families and parents. Furthermore, dual-earner families became increasingly common during these decades, a trend that reflects the experience of economic stress and the changing conditions of economic necessity. More and more people continued to enter the work force, devoting an unprecedented amount of time to their professional responsibilities. This new devotion to one’s work partly resulted from the changing standards of a middle class lifestyle that required the accumulation of consumer debt. Consequently, as spouses and parents made decisions that affected gender roles, childrearing and family life, they not only had to adjust to a confused cultural environment, but also had to adapt to increasingly demanding economic stresses and consumer desires.

Thus, the search for a simpler version of family life, found most conveniently in the image of the postwar family, became characteristic of these years. The culture wars exploded not only because of ideological changes resulting from the tumult of the ‘60s and ‘70s, but also because the issues they addressed resonated with the concrete changes that many Americans faced in the everyday minutiae of family life. The broad trends relating to family, marriage and parenting that developed during these decades were far from universal. These developments tended instead toward the

contradictory and the chaotic, echoing the ambiguity that characterized so much of American family life during this time.

**Marriage and Divorce**

Following the surge of American women into the workforce in the second half of the 20th century, it would seem that marriage should have become decreasingly central to the life of the average American. At this point, marriage no longer marked the passage from youth into adulthood (most young adults moved away from home and found employment before marrying), and people generally married later than those in previous generations. Marriage in the postwar era was generally preferred over singlehood not only because of the pervasive ideology of distinct gender roles, but also because of the economic benefits that accompanied the postwar family model. The specialization model that flourished in the 1950s was based on the belief that couples could be most efficient when one spouse focused on market production (the breadwinner—typically the man’s role), while the other was dedicated to home production (the housewife). As women entered the realm of market production with greater frequency, however, these benefits of marriage became less relevant.25

Yet most Americans continued to regard marriage as a valuable and important part of their lives. Compared to citizens of similar countries—including Canada, the UK, France, Germany, Italy and Sweden—people in the US married and divorced at higher rates. Americans were also least likely to agree that marriage is outdated, and that “divorce is usually the best solution when a couple can’t seem to work out their

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marriage problems.” Additionally, they were more likely to agree that “people who want children should get married.”

Furthermore, college-educated women, who were historically consistently less likely to marry than those without a college degree, married at rates that very nearly closed the gap between these two demographics. Because educational attainment is highly indicative of socioeconomic status, this trend links class status with familial practices, which came to affect the attitudes and practices of many Americans during this time. Class-based issues heavily influenced the topics that were widely discussed in the culture wars, and while some cultural trends were widespread, certain trends appeared to affect Americans along class lines. For example, not only did marriage grow more appealing to educated women in the decades around the turn of the millennium, but a similar trend also became visible in the divorce rates of married couples of the professional class.

In the midst of sweeping cultural changes in the ‘70s, divorce levels grew rapidly. As more and more women earned their own salaries, they began to recognize that they too could seek out relationships that contributed to their own personal satisfaction. This surge in divorce rates produced anxiety nationwide, leading many sociologists to conduct studies on the effects of divorce on children. Most of these studies concluded that children of divorced parents fared worse than those whose parents remained together. And while these studies were often critiqued years later for not comparing children of divorced parents with children of parents

26 Ibid., 34.
28 Stevenson and Wolfers, Marriage and Divorce 28.
who stayed together in spite of severe conflict, the effects of these sociological studies and the extensive media coverage they received contributed to a decline in the divorce rate after it peaked in 1981.29 The divorce rate did stabilize by the 1990s, returning to predicted levels, but the decreasing prevalence of divorce in the US was not evenly distributed across the population. Just as college-educated women were marrying at greater rates than ever before, members of the professional class were divorcing at much lower rates than the rest of the population. Following the surge in the 1970s, Steven P. Martin concluded in a 2004 study, “marital dissolution rates . . . declined, but only for individuals with a four year college degree, and perhaps especially for women with a four year college degree.”30 The gap between college-educated and non-college-educated women increased from a 9.6% difference in marital dissolutions in the early ‘70s, to a 19% difference in the early ‘90s. From this evidence, Martin deduces that “the overall slight decline in divorce rates since the 1970s [was] a result of rapidly declining divorce rates among highly educated women and high, stable divorce rates among less educated women.”31

Martin’s work highlights this class-based divide in marriage and divorce trends, which reinforces the question of why traditional values were increasingly shaping the marital practices of the professional class. Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers offer one explanation for this divide, attributing its development to the replacement of the postwar specialization model of marriage with a new model

29 Ibid., 30.
31 Ibid., 13.
emphasis on “consumption complementarities.”32 With both spouses focusing on market production, the efficiency of the specialization model became increasingly irrelevant. The shared resources between spouses in dual-earner marriages, however, proved to be a benefit to the professional class at a time when American culture increasingly valued leisure and consumption. In a commercial society that placed emotional fulfillment largely within the context of consumption, marriage became one realm in which the middle class could strive for this fulfillment. The professional class, according to this argument, treated the institution of marriage as a way to maintain the level of resources necessary for this consumption, but marriage itself also became indicative of one’s class status.

While the context of the consumer economy does provide one satisfactory explanation for the persistence of marriage within the educated professional class, it does less to explain this demographic’s acceptance of many of the norms of “traditional” family life. It’s undeniable that, in many ways, marital behavior had changed significantly since the postwar era. Toward the end of the first decade of the 21st century, 83% of men and 84% of women agreed that husbands and wives were negotiating more than couples in earlier generations about relationships, work, and family.33 Given that marriage in the postwar era was characterized largely by patriarchal authority, the women’s movement seemed to have been successful in replacing a gendered imbalance of power with a more equitable relationship based around discussion and negotiation of familial and household issues.

32 Stevenson and Wolfers, Marriage and Divorce 41.
33 Halpin et al., 403.
Nevertheless, despite this advancement in marital equality, various gender-based inequalities carried over into the 1990s and 2000s, including the gendered division of household labor. 85% of women in dual-earner couples felt that they took on more responsibility for the household than their male partners. However, only 67% of men believed that women took on more of this responsibility. While the fact that a majority of both genders recognized that women were largely responsible for household labor is important in itself, the sizeable gap between male and female perceptions is also significant.34 While married couples were negotiating more, housework and childrearing continued to be considered primarily female responsibilities. The disconnect that developed between husbands and wives’ perceptions about their contribution to household labor suggests that while the typical married couple negotiated more frequently, their discussions perhaps did not include concerns about the unequal distribution of responsibilities. Or if couples did discuss this, it’s possible that more negotiation did not necessarily result in concrete behavioral changes. In their attempts to integrate elements of the equitable and companionate marriage into the established traditional marital structure, middle class women, upon whom this task largely fell, were often unsuccessful.

In The Shriver Report, both Stephanie Coontz and sociologist Michael Kimmel (who appears in a documentary feature on the DVD of season two of Mad Men detailing the “Birth of an Independent Woman”) describe the link between the perception of equal division of labor and greater marital satisfaction for both husbands and wives.35 Interestingly, another 2009 study noted a trend in which

34 Ibid., 405.
women across demographic groups had become less happy over time, “with declines in happiness . . . steepest among those with some college.”\textsuperscript{36} Considering this trend, what seems to matter most in the discussion of equitable sharing of housework is not simply the existence of a perception gap between genders. More importantly, the fact that women in dual-earner couples were more likely than men to believe that wives assumed more responsibility for household and family responsibilities is probably related to the growing unhappiness among women. Stevenson and Wolfers make note of this in their study, explaining that women largely “maintained the emotional responsibility for home and family.” Even though men were committing more hours to housework than those in previous generations, “it is difficult to know just how much of the overall burden of home production ha[d] shifted, as measuring the emotional . . . work of making a home is a much more difficult task.”\textsuperscript{37}

\textit{Women and the Workplace}

Any examination of the growing unhappiness among women would be incomplete, however, without a discussion of the implications of women’s professional lives on their personal lives. The conservative complaint that gained traction in the last decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century tended to blame feminism for women’s frustrations, arguing that feminists forced women to find satisfaction in the workplace instead of (more appropriately) at home. Some signs appeared in the ‘90s and early 21\textsuperscript{st} century that suggested the permanent entry of women into the workplace was

\textsuperscript{36} Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, “The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness,” \textit{American Economic Journal: Economic Policy} 2009 1.2 (2009): 210. Stevenson and Wolfers measured subjective well-being using the following question: “Taken all together, how would you say things are these days, would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?”

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 191.
widely regarded as positive for American society. Less than one-fifth of Americans viewed the entry of women in the workplace as somewhat or very negative.\textsuperscript{38} Since the postwar years served as a formative era for a large portion of the American population in this time period, this statistic seems to point to a striking optimism regarding the changes that occurred in the latter half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.

But one of the major problems within the debate about gender roles and family life during these years was the extensive ambiguity concerning women’s role in the home and in the workplace. While most Americans accepted the general entry of women into the professional realm without reservation, when faced with more specific examples of the role of women in contemporary American society, this optimism became significantly more subdued. When comparing prevailing attitudes from the 1960s through the 1980s with those that developed in the late ‘90s, it becomes clear that Americans in the earlier period were more positive concerning women’s evolving societal role, and that this trend of positivity leveled off in the ‘90s.\textsuperscript{39}

The prevalent conservative ideology of the 90s certainly can account for some of the ambivalence towards women’s changing roles during these years. But concerning the growing unhappiness among women themselves, society’s failure to catch up to their changing status has had a larger effect on their own ambivalence than the actual feminist ideology that spurred this change. Stevenson and Wolfers acknowledged that “the increased opportunity to succeed in many dimensions”

\textsuperscript{38} Halpin et al., 398.
presented to women during these years, “may have led to an increased likelihood of believing that one’s life is not measuring up.” Additionally, women were now more likely to “compare their lives to a broader group, including men, and find their lives more likely to come up short in this assessment.”

Now that they could more easily compare their personal and professional achievements to those of the men around them, women’s increasing unhappiness seems reasonable, considering the inability or unwillingness of the American workplace to adapt to the reality of women’s changing lives. Women tended to be more negative about the implications of maternal employment in the late ‘90s than in the ‘60s, ‘70s and ‘80s, a trend that can be attributed in part to the reality that the women in these previous generations were living the changes brought about by second-wave feminism. Perhaps having seen their own mothers unhappily leave employment for marriage, or experiencing this themselves, women at the height of second-wave feminism found the relatively novel belief that women could be equal to men in the workplace, and that female professional ambition could be viewed as positive, especially powerful.

For the women who entered adulthood in the 1990s, however, the celebration of the working woman existed more as an increasingly distant historical occurrence than a reality of their daily lives. Further removed from the visible transformation of women’s roles, these women were forced to confront the practices that hadn’t changed over the years. Americans in the 1990s frequently discussed the implications of the gender-based wage gap. Working mothers in particular were frustrated by the lack of nationally mandated maternity leave or nationally funded childcare. A general

40 Stevenson and Wolfers, *Female Happiness* 223-224.
discomfort with powerful women persisted in the day-to-day lives of many Americans (both men and women reported feeling uncomfortable working for a female boss). As women made choices every day that affected the overall direction of their lives, they were up against roadblocks resulting from the continued influence of traditional gender ideology on institutional practices. As journalist Judith Warner explained in a 2009 Op-Ed, “society has failed women, most importantly . . . by failing to address the needs of working families.”

The failure of the public sphere to fully accept women as equal to men became inextricable from the similarly disappointing failure of the private sphere to do the same. Underlying the relentless debate about where women belonged, was the largely accepted notion that women, not men, should consider childcare and housework as their domain, and that men’s professional goals should take precedence. In a 2010 article, journalist Ann Friedman pointedly expressed her frustration with this issue. Despite claiming to support egalitarian marriages, she explained, “many [men] seem to think equality means offering their partner the option of holding a job -- not taking on 50 percent homemaking and caregiving responsibilities themselves because they view their partner's career as equally valuable.”

Decades after the postwar era had ended, many Americans still clung to the belief that having a mother stay home with her child would be most beneficial to the family as a whole. The existence of dual-earner marriages continued to be viewed by many, not as a situation that would result in the family’s well-being, but as a

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41 Halpin et al., 409.
43 Friedman.
concession granted to wives and mothers. Many women began to feel that although they were given the opportunity to work, they were rarely allowed to be as devoted to their work lives as their husbands were, with the expectation that they would one day turn to motherhood.

“Mommy Wars” and the Demands of Middle Class Parenting

The gender issues of the workplace, and their relation to the home lives of American families, arose in an environment in which increasingly intensive parenting practices were leaving middle class parents frustrated with the seemingly impossible task of balancing their commitments to work and to family. New sociological work highlighting this childrearing transformation appeared during these years, especially in the ethnographic research of Annette Lareau. But popular discourse about the struggles of modern parenting also flourished, as mostly female writers turned to their own personal domestic struggles with motherhood for their primary subject matter. This particular writing style became so prominent in the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century that it was identified as distinct genre, referred to as “Mommy Lit.” Both the sociological and the popular reaction to parenthood in the 21st century emphasize the difficulty that middle class parents faced in their attempts to adhere to increasingly intensive standards in childrearing with little institutional support. But more importantly, they highlighted the difficulties parents, mostly mothers, faced in overcoming the engrained attitudes and expectations within their own households.

With the findings she published in Unequal Childhoods in 2005, Annette Lareau became a central sociological voice in the discussion of parenting norms at the
beginning of the century, particularly with her recognition of their divergence along class lines. Though “helicopter parents” were a favorite topic of the media for some time before 2005, Lareau was able to pinpoint intensive parenting as an overwhelmingly middle class phenomenon. These new middle class parenting values insisted on the importance of a parent’s investment in his or her child’s development, regarding this investment as necessary for the fulfillment of both adult and child. Lareau’s study highlighted the practices of these parents, who became concerned with the “concerted cultivation” of their children, recognizing the importance of “stimulating their child’s development and foster[ing] their cognitive and social skills.”

As Lareau’s research highlighted, the ordinary life of middle class families was characterized by hectic days filled with planned leisure activities that required substantial commitment from both parents and children. Middle-class parents also tended to communicate with their children through discussion and negotiation, with the intention of improving their child’s ability to articulate his or her own views and exposing them to knowledge they wouldn’t otherwise encounter. The use of these communication techniques, coupled with the growing likelihood of parental involvement in their children’s activities, had the effect of lessening the hierarchy between adult and child in the middle class family.

The childrearing habits of working class and poor families, however, did not undergo the same transformation, as these parents were concerned primarily with the natural growth of their children, leaving less time and few resources to devote to the

44 Annette Lareau, Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life (Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2003), 5.
45 Ibid., 105-159.
intensive cultivation of their children’s interests. While her study demonstrated the near constant adult presence in a middle class child’s daily routine, Lareau’s observations of working-class and poor children revealed a separation between adult and child. This separation structured these families’ lives in a way that differentiated them from middle-class families in the level of independence and choice given to the child during their free time.\textsuperscript{46} Additionally, the language these parents most commonly used with their children tended to be more functional than the debate and discussion of middle class families, indicated by the more frequent use of directives and occasional threats of physical punishment.

In her description of middle class families Lareau notes what she calls a “pattern of gendered labor,” in which fathers often assumed fewer childcare responsibilities than mothers, even in dual-earner couples.\textsuperscript{47} Lareau only briefly mentions this disparity, which mirrors the disparity in household labor more generally, but \textit{The Shriver Report} presents evidence of a similar finding. When asked who was more involved in childcare, 69\% of women said that they assumed most of the responsibility, whereas only 13\% of men declared that they took on this role. 43\% of men believed their spouse was mostly responsible for childcare, while only 4\% of women held this belief. Only 40\% of men and 25\% of women believed that both spouses were equally responsible.\textsuperscript{48} These statistics and Lareau’s observation of the “pattern of gendered labor” in middle class families are representative of larger issues that became integral to the extensive discussion of parenting practices around the turn of the millennium. As many American families attempted to adapt to the lifestyle

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 37.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 51.
\textsuperscript{48} Halpin et al., 409.
changes that accompanied the shift to dual-earner marriages, the national discussion on childcare responsibilities increasingly fixated largely on mothers and motherhood.

The debate surrounding motherhood took many forms during these two decades, appearing frequently in newspaper articles, in best-selling books, and on television news programs, becoming so ubiquitous it earned its own cultural slogan: the Mommy Wars. The discussion in the media became centered on a dichotomy between working mothers and stay-at-home moms, as men, women, pundits, politicians, mothers and fathers alike began to debate the relative merits and consequences of different parenting practices on the child and the family.

The Mommy Wars debate was concentrated largely on middle and upper-middle class families. Because the subject of the debate was whether mothers should choose to stay home or choose to work, the controversy applied only to those parents whose socioeconomic status did not necessarily require that they work to support their family. The families invoked in this debate were those who realistically could support themselves by adhering to the postwar family ideal of the male-breadwinner, female-homemaker model. Thus, the debate fixated on whether or not a woman who had the possibility of staying home to raise her children, should stay at home to raise her children.

Some of the most vocal participants in the so-called Mommy Wars expressed opinions that were fully in line with the conservative complaint about gender and family life. With the 2006 publication of To Hell With All That: Loving and Loathing Our Inner Housewife, Caitlin Flanagan exalted full-time motherhood in her typical pointed and evocative style. She admits that her children gained nothing “of
quantifiable value” from the time they spent with her as a stay-at-home mother. “All they gained,” she forcefully claims, “was the sweetness of being with the person who loved them most in the world. All they gained was an immersion in the most powerful force on earth: mother love.”49 In her discussion of modern housewifery, Flanagan spares no sympathy for the feminist ideology that had “so thoroughly indoctrinated” modern women that “we can hardly scrape a dish without fuming about the inequitable distribution of domestic labor within a marriage.”50

Some writers emerged who unreservedly argued against the exaltation of full-time motherhood that Flanagan represented. In Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World, for example, Linda Hirschman declared that “bounding home is not good for women and it’s not good for the society. The women aren’t using their capacities fully, [and] their so-called free choice makes them unfree dependents on their husbands.”51 By playing into the patriarchy and gender hierarchy that categorized the postwar era, Hirschman argued, middle-class, stay-at-home mothers were accepting the oppressive family norms that feminists had fought so hard to change. But while beliefs like Hirschman’s were given some attention during the Clinton and Bush years, their prominence was decidedly less pronounced than the ideology espoused by women like Flanagan.

The concept of choice was often invoked in the debate over the mother’s role within the family and the workplace, an issue specifically and controversially addressed in a New York Times article from 2003, entitled “The Opt-Out

49 Flanagan, 220.
50 Ibid., 216.
In this article, Lisa Belkin describes an alleged trend in which wealthy, educated women were choosing not to work, focusing her commentary on a group of Princeton graduates who decided to devote their time to motherhood instead of high-powered careers. These women, Belkin reported, viewed their choice to opt out of the workplace as temporary, not as a commitment to housewifery. She also stressed that these women were rejecting the notion that fulfillment and success were only achievable through fast-track careers. “Why don’t women run the world?” Belkin asked New York Times readers. “Maybe it’s because they don’t want to.”

Besides coining the phrase “opting out,” Belkin’s article became the source of much public discussion as sociologists and economists began to weigh in on the implications of this so-called trend. In fact, many dismissed Belkin’s claim that these women were representative of a trend at all, and the article even inspired a study conducted by the Center for WorkLife Law entitled “‘Opt Out’ or Pushed Out?: How the Press Covers Work/Family Conflict.” Refuting the media’s simplistic storyline of women voluntarily “opting out” of the workplace, this study presented an alternative narrative about women and work. The authors included evidence that was often ignored in public debate, including the reality that many of the women who left the workplace did not so much “opt out” as feel forced out of the professional world due to “gender bias triggered by motherhood.”


The reaction to the Mommy Wars and the media’s simplistic treatment of motherhood was far from purely academic, however. As the Mommy Wars played out, journalistic accounts on this topic became both prevalent and popular, particularly among middle class women whose familial decisions were most often implicated in the public debate. Two of the most popular accounts, *The Bitch in the House* and *Perfect Madness*, spent, respectively, two and three weeks on the *New York Times* Bestseller List. These accounts of motherhood most often addressed the ambiguities, frustrations and complexities that accompanied the failure of the workplace and the family to adapt to the reality of women’s lives. Written by prominent female writers and journalists, they critiqued the supposedly liberating options presented to mothers, and articulated the complicated choices that women faced in this era.

These books devoted their pages to describing the dilemma of modern motherhood, in which women were caught in a web of conflicting responsibilities. They lamented the impossibility of maintaining a successful career while remaining an ideal and engaged mother and wife, all without adequate support from the workplace, their husbands, or the government. Almost every one of these writers begins her work by referencing the mothers of 1950s television, or Betty Friedan’s “problem with no name,” immediately situating their own experiences as parallel to those of postwar mothers. Early on in *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*, for example, Judith Warner details the differences between motherhood and fatherhood that she found to ring true among the women she interviewed for the 2005 book:
Lives filled with knee pads and bake sales and dentist’s appointments and car seats. Lives somehow lesser than those of their full-time working husbands—men who managed, when the kids ran wild in the morning, spilling their Cheerios, and losing their shoes, to lose themselves in the newspaper, fading ‘into black and white . . . just like Father Knows Best.’

Warner noticeably draws on *The Feminine Mystique* throughout her work, labeling the anxiety of motherhood the “Mommy Mystique,” or “the new problem that has no name.” Warner declared this problem to be that “too many women in America are becoming sick with exhaustion and stress as they try to do things that can’t be—shouldn’t be—done . . . Too many are . . . overwhelmed and disappointed . . . Too many feel out of control.” Because of this overwhelming anxiety, Warner explains, “it is impossible to read the depictions of motherhood in Friedan’s time without a shock of recognition.”

A year earlier, Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels published *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women*, which recounted a similar trend. Referring to the problem as “new momism,” Douglas and Michaels objected to “the insistence” in the media “that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids . . . and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children.” They note how “the ‘mommy wars’ put mothers into two, mutually exclusive categories—working mother versus stay-at-home mother,” which not only “pit[s] mother against mother,” but also “suggests that

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55 Ibid., 55.
56 Ibid., 39.
all women be reduced to their one role—mother—or get out of the picture entirely.”

Douglas and Michaels insist that “the question . . . is not which path women choose, or which one is ‘right.’ The question is why one reactionary, normative ideology, so out of sync with millions of women’s lives, seems to be getting the upper hand.”

Books compiling the voices and opinions of a range of women were equally popular, attempting to create a more nuanced look at the issues that modern women faced. In the introduction to *Mommy Wars*, a collection of essays from 26 women, editor Leslie Morgan Steiner declared that she was sick of hearing about the “mommy wars” from “experts: researchers academics, politicians, journalists. Many of them aren’t women. Some aren’t even parents.” She began collecting essays from women about their actual experiences, inspired partly by her own “curiosity and confusion about other moms’ lives.” Even more, she wanted to “bridge the gap between working-mom fantasies and fears about stay-at-home lives,” to help “end this catfight and emerge united.”

Cathi Hanauer edited a similar compilation, the flippantly titled *The Bitch in the House*, which was “born out of . . . [her] own domestic anger.” She writes of her husband, “Dan was doing more parenting than he ever had (and feeling, I imagined, like a better father than those of previous generations simply by virtue of being around), yet I still felt I . . . was responsible for the kids . . . as well as handling all the ‘domestic’ things I’d always done.” She connected her own experience to a broad trend she had noticed, specifically that “ambitious women . . . juggling jobs, and marriages, and, sometimes, small children . . . also were resentful, guilty, [and]

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58 Ibid., 12.
59 Ibid., 24.
These works of popular journalism were representative of a larger desire among middle-class women to move beyond the oversimplified debate between working mothers and stay-at-home moms that typified the rhetoric of the Mommy Wars. The popularity of these books confirmed the existence of a market for nuanced discourse that attempted to navigate the ambiguity of the role of women in the modern family, rejecting both the glorification of motherhood and of the workplace.

**Men’s Reactions to Changing Family Life**

In the aftermath of second-wave feminism, however, middle class women weren’t the only segment of the population attempting to define where they belonged in a society in which gender roles were becoming less and less rigid. A small but passionate group of men came together in response to their feelings of disempowerment, as women were entering into roles that they believed rightfully belonged to men. But many other men’s movements, particularly those that attracted middle class men, were centered less on feelings of economic or legal deprivation, and more around the idea that the current dominant narrative of masculinity was leaving men emotionally and spiritually deprived. These groups turned to myths and stories in search of a lost sense of manhood, a technique most famously pioneered by Robert Bly and the mythopoetic men’s movement, and the more religious Promise Keepers movement. In addition, thousands of black men converged on Washington in...

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62 Filene, 238.
1995 for the Million Man March, challenging the negative portrayal of black men in the media and hoping to convey a reconceived version of manhood.\textsuperscript{63}

These factions never coalesced into a single men’s movement, which Peter Filene interprets as a sign of “the confusions and ambivalence felt by individual men as they struggled, in the post-feminist era, to define who they wanted to be.”\textsuperscript{64} Michael Kimmel, however, points to the fact that these groups were composed of only a small segment of American men, while most of the nation’s men were involved in the less newsworthy process of “gradually, and without fanfare or struggle, drift[ing] into more egalitarian relationships because they love[d] their wives, partners, and children.”\textsuperscript{65}

This transformation of American manhood was accompanied by a renewed interest in fatherhood among many men. While it lacked the widespread attention of the Mommy Wars, it indicated further alterations to the “traditional” family model. During the ‘90s and into the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, men began participating more in household work, particularly in parenting. While the image of the postwar father is most often of the “benevolent but absent breadwinner,” the modern father was “expected to be intimately involved with all aspects of his children’s lives.”\textsuperscript{66} If this had actually been the case, then fathers’ involvement in their children’s lives would seem to contradict the stress women felt in their dual role as professional and primary caregiver. But, in fact, the attitudes and practices of modern fatherhood were largely in line with the somewhat unequal equitable marriage that characterized this period.

\textsuperscript{63} Kimmel, 333-338.
\textsuperscript{64} Filene, 246.
\textsuperscript{65} Kimmel, 345.
This new devotion to fatherhood among many men was most often not a sign of men’s devotion to gender equality and feminism, but was instead related to an overall increase in the standards of what constituted adequate devotion to one’s family. Similarly, while men contributed more to childrearing, the time that fathers devoted to parenting was overwhelmingly in activities centered around spending time with their children, instead of tasks involving housework. As Kimmel points out, this imbalance frequently resulted in “a dangerous disequilibrium . . . in which dad became the ‘fun parent.’” Fathers were more likely to be able to spend leisure time with their children without the stress and time commitment involved in doing their laundry, cooking them dinner, or cleaning up their messes. Considering the new fathering techniques’ consistency with women’s frustrations, it’s not surprising that many professional class women would be attracted to a book entitled *The Bitch in the House.*

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The frustrations of parenting for both men and women in the 21st century are undeniable, as expectations of the role of the parent rose, while clearly defined gender roles became ever more muddled. However, this general ambivalence surrounding the expectations and inequalities of marriage and parenting did not leave people of either gender feeling that family life was not worthwhile. In fact, when asked what they would want most for their own daughter, 63% of men and 56% of women ranked “A happy marriage and children” first on their list. Only 17% of men and 23% of women

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67 Kimmel, 351.
ranked “An interesting career” first, and 15% of men and 19% of women ranked “Financial success” as their first choice.  

During these years, many members of the professional class were, in principle, looking to marriage for emotional satisfaction at the same time that, in practice, spouses were less invested in mutual social activities and overall time spent together. The connection between the idealistic expectations of marriage, and the reality of the marital relationship, grew increasingly fraught. The success of Lori Gottlieb’s *Marry Him: The Case for Settling for Mr. Good Enough* in 2010 proved that marriage was considered by many to be self-evidently good for one’s health, happiness, children and economic well-being. But this perception stood in contrast to the reality that family and marriage were characterized by what journalist Ruth Franklin describes as “minor grievances . . . : the daily squabbles, the claustrophobia, the loneliness of discovering that the person you thought would be your constant companion no longer has the interest or ability to meet your needs.” Perhaps the most prominent response to this contradiction was a widespread emphasis on the acceptance of scaled-back expectations. Professional class adults learned to compromise in their family life, justifying the profound disappointments of marriage by focusing on the benefits, and popular discourse often emphasized both the inescapability and the value of making such compromises. The common wisdom was summarized well by one commenter on Franklin’s article:

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68 Halpin et al., 401.
People fall short of ideals—every one of us, and pretty much most days. Being well married is not about finding the perfect complement to oneself, it's about charting a course together that gives the two of you, plus any children you add to the mix, opportunity and room to grow together, support each other, and as the passion wanes, provide the kind of mutual satisfactions that make life first, bearable, and ultimately meaningful. 

When *The Sopranos* first aired in 1999, followed by *Mad Men* in 2007, television viewers were introduced to families who embodied this contradiction; families who exemplified the exhausting public debate about gender and parenting while simultaneously mocking and subverting it. The Sopranos and the Drapers provide an image not only of the love, companionship, intimacy and structure that were most readily associated with television families, but also of the bewilderment, frustration, violence, manipulation and disappointment that was present, but rarely articulated, in the lives of many Americans.

HBO chose to market the second season of *The Sopranos* with the tagline, “Family. Redefined,” emphasizing the double meaning of family that defined the mafia hit. But the tagline applied just as easily to the gender- and family-related tensions that many Americans, particularly the professional class, faced at the turn of the century. With this marketing decision that emphasized the way the series blurred and obscured the meanings of family, HBO reached out to a particularly wealthy and educated niche of viewers whose family life was characterized by tension and contradiction—and these viewers proved highly willing to purchase just this brand of challenging programming.

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It’s hard to imagine classic characters from American television series past spending time lounging on a couch in front of the TV screen. Lucy Ricardo was too busy coming up with wild plans to escape from mundane housewifery; Perry Mason had bigger concerns, fighting for the wrongly accused; Dr. Marcus Welby couldn’t fit in hours of television in between patients. On *Mad Men* and *The Sopranos*, however, television plays a large role in shaping nearly every character’s life. The characters spend hours in front of TV screens, whether spending time with family, engaging with major national news, staving off boredom, or escaping from the depression and conflict that characterizes their day-to-day lives.

In the world of the early 1960s on *Mad Men*, television serves as a conduit for creating a shared experience between Americans across the nation. In the first episode of the second season, which takes place on Valentine’s Day in 1962, viewers catch glimpses of several of the show’s couples sitting down to watch *A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy*. This television special, which followed Jackie Kennedy around the newly decorated White House, aired on all three major networks,

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drawing an audience of 56 million people.\textsuperscript{2} \textit{Mad Men} uses this footage to illuminate the marital life of each character, from Don’s inability to perform sexually within his marriage, to Sal’s closeted homosexuality, to Joan’s growing dissatisfaction with her new husband. Despite the distinct problems they faced, each character’s eyes were drawn to the same image on the television screen.\textsuperscript{3} Television plays a much more serious role in the show’s depiction of the Kennedy assassination, as each character is confronted with the devastating news through this medium. The viewer watches as Duck selfishly turns off his TV because Peggy is coming meet him at his hotel room, as Betty and her African-American maid Carla sit together on the same couch for the first time in the series, and as Harry talks to Pete at the Sterling Cooper offices with his television muted behind him, announcing the assassination as they obliviously continue their conversation.\textsuperscript{4}

Set in the early 21\textsuperscript{st} century, \textit{The Sopranos} presents a different version of television, both technologically (in the fifth season Tony has a big-screen TV with movie theater-quality sound installed in his home) and ideologically. Instead of the national significance that it often carries on \textit{Mad Men}, television on \textit{The Sopranos} is a form of solitude and a means of escape. While the Drapers of \textit{Mad Men} frequently watch shows together as a family, members of the Soprano family are often depicted watching alone, choosing programs that suit their individual interests. Tony frequently watches the History Channel, escaping the demands of his family life and professional life, entering instead into a particularly heroic and masculine version of

\textsuperscript{3} “For Those Who Think Young,” Season 2 Episode 1.
the past. When Livia is in the hospital in the first season, she flips to the Food Network in search of something or someone that can provide her with the one thing she finds comforting in her miserable life—the reassurance she finds in criticizing others. “He’s not even washing his hands,” she sneers about Emeril Lagasse. Uncle Junior is perhaps the most attached to television—while under house arrest, unable to go out into the real world, he watches anything from soap operas, to *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, to HBO’s own *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, which Junior amusingly and heartbreakingly confuses with his own life.6

Transforming their characters into television viewers allows *Mad Men* and *The Sopranos* to achieve a range of objectives. In this way, the programs are able to insist on their uniquely realistic style. Most Americans do indeed spend hours watching TV each day and it would be inauthentic to exclude this activity from the lives of their characters. The creators and writers of these programs are also able to illuminate the larger cultural role that television served in each of the eras they depict, a shifting role that depended on the economic and distribution factors that characterized the industry at those times. The changing aspects of the television industry are key to understanding the industrial environment in which these shows flourished.

But perhaps most significantly, and most distinctively, these examples reflect the artfully self-conscious nature of these programs. *Mad Men* and *The Sopranos* are shows that quite obviously reach viewers through the mass medium of television. Yet the programs examine the conditions and restrictions of television and mass culture as

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5 “Do Not Resuscitate,” Season 2 Episode 2.
6 “Where’s Johnny?” Season 5 Episode 3.
crucial themes. By incorporating this meta-reflection into the content of their programming, the writers and producers of *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* attempted to see their work as separate from the mass appeal of the “average” television program, an attempt that was encouraged by the specific set of economic factors affecting the cable market. The cable business model that flourished in the years around the turn of the millennium encouraged cable industry professionals, from the network executives, to the creators, to the writers, to the directors, to view their products as distinctive and to pursue an exceptional level of complexity in their work. This complexity was reflected in their exploration of gender, family, work and class status, and in their representation of their own relationship to mass culture and the television industry.

As the 20th century came to a close, the long-form, serialized cable drama began to show its first signs of success. By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, this type of programming had proved itself an enduring commercial and artistic achievement. The cultural distinction that it earned and its share of the population entertainment market grew tremendously after the form’s initial success in the 1990s. By 2009, the ambitious, challenging, and visually unique television drama was so firmly established that one critic could refer to the preceding ten years as the age “When TV Became Art.” As journalist Emily Nussbaum writes, this was a decade of inspiration ushered in by *The Sopranos*, “a prescient creation, a symbol of what was taking place across the schedule.” This “decade of innovation” was “capped
by the rise of Matthew Weiner . . . whose narcotic Mad Men brought back the watercooler debates of The Sopranos.”

This new variety of television programming seemed to emerge so fluidly onto the nation’s television screens that it’s tempting to see its development as an inevitable step in the evolution of the television industry from crude mass medium to producer of upscale artistic entertainment. But this analysis plays too heavily into the marketing strategy of the companies and professionals that produced these series, and it ignores the historical specificity of the moment at which this particular type of programming began to thrive. The success of the cable drama resulted from a set of developments that created an industrial environment that allowed this type of programming to flourish. Television regulations, industrial practices, and distribution methods all underwent dramatic transformations in the last decades of the 20th century. In the midst of these changes, cable networks, producers, and audiences responded in ways that created an economically viable platform for the development, production, and consumption of these ambitious programs.

The technology of cable television developed well before the success of the cable drama series of the 1990s. In fact, the idea that cable TV could be used as a fee-based alternative to the programming provided by broadcast networks originated as early as the 1970s. However, it wasn’t until the 1990s that the cable industry, amidst a range of industrial transformations, was able to develop a business model that could

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realistically compete with broadcast programming. With its passage of the Telecommunications Act in 1996, Congress revised regulations that had been in place for over 60 years and, in the process, helped to encourage competition between broadcast and cable networks. After the passage of this act, the television industry became characterized by “diversification and competition” and increasingly “driven by . . . brand equity, consumer demand and customer satisfaction.”

Though television had been around since the middle of the 20th century, the number of channels offered to viewers only began to increase in the last few decades of the century. Following industry deregulation, the number of channels reaching American homes multiplied at an astounding rate. Just seven years after the passage of the Telecommunications Act, households received an average of 100 channels, compared to 55 in 2001, and just 33 in 1990. This dramatic increase demonstrates the speed with which network executives, producers, advertisers and consumers adjusted to this transformation. But more importantly, the rapid proliferation of channels available to the average American indicates the decline of the broadcast system that had dominated the television industry for most of its existence. As viewers were granted more viewing choices in this increasingly competitive television environment, each network was forced to vie for their attention. As a result, cable networks that had previously focused their programming around movies or sporting events began to recognize the advantages of producing original programming that would air more regularly. Cable networks were beginning to realize that they

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couldn’t afford to be an “occasional-use medium” and needed to provide programming that could bring viewers back each week.\textsuperscript{11}

The development of the eventually successful cable business model was further affected by the transformation of television from a mass medium to medium divided into niche markets. For much of television’s history, networks produced programming that reflected their pursuit of the largest possible audience. When viewers got to choose between programming on hundreds of channels, however, sustaining this mass viewership became increasingly impractical. Compared to their broadcast competitors, cable networks were better positioned to take advantage of a strategy that became possible only with the gradual progression of the mass television audience into a collection of niche viewers with different interests and needs. By focusing on narrowcasting, the practice of seeking out a small but specific viewership, cable networks could sustain commercial viability without fighting against broadcast networks that had a wider base of potential viewers. The expansion of the cable market partly resulted from the transformation of this mass audience into distinct demographics, but it also contributed to its further segmentation.

The programming that flourished on cable networks around the turn of the millennium was often quite expensive to produce. Consequently, its success relied on the distribution practices that were available to these networks. Premium cable channels became more confident in their ability to produce profitable programming due, in small part, to an act passed by Congress in 1992 that set aside a block of time on broadcast schedules for edgier material. This act helped to convince cable

\textsuperscript{11} Christopher Anderson, “Producing an Aristocracy of Culture in American Television,” in The Essential HBO Reader (see note 7), 32-33.
networks that they could obtain additional revenue from syndication of their original programming.\textsuperscript{12} The growing popularity of DVDs served a similar purpose for cable networks, lowering the risks of devoting resources to edgy programming by assuring a secondary market would be available if the series didn’t prove to be as profitable as the network hoped. In the case of \textit{The Sopranos}, for example, HBO earned back the cost of producing the first three seasons of the program through DVD sales alone.\textsuperscript{13}

However, the contributions of ancillary markets to cable’s success were minor compared to the most important development leading to the success of premium cable beginning in the 1990s. Instead of depending solely on revenue from advertisers, cable networks relied, in varying degrees, on subscription sales. The business model that cable networks devised in the ‘90s took advantage of the commercial differences between their strategy and that of broadcast networks. Whereas broadcast channels were available to any home that owned a working television set, cable was an “invited guest,” reaching only those households that paid a subscription fee to a specific network, or to a cable provider.\textsuperscript{14}

Subscription cable specifically involves a direct transaction between network and consumer; the consumer pays a monthly fee to the network, and the network, in turn, provides the consumer with commercial-free content. HBO was the first network to attempt subscription television and thus pioneered first-order commodity

\textsuperscript{12} Avi Santo, “Para-Television and Discourses of Distinction: The Culture of Production at HBO” in \textit{It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era} (see note 8), 23.
\textsuperscript{13} Lotz, 129.
relations in the television industry, which had previously existed in literary markets.\footnote{Mark C. Rogers, Michael Epstein, and Jimmie L. Reeves, “The Sopranos as Brand Equity: The Art of Commerce in the Age of Digital Representation,” \textit{This Thing of Ours: Investigating The Sopranos}, ed. David Lavery (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2003), 46.} HBO eventually proved the profitability of the subscription model, and by the end of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, HBO’s production of successful original programming, including \textit{Oz}, \textit{Sex and the City}, and particularly \textit{The Sopranos}, demonstrated to other cable networks how best to stand out in a cluttered television environment.

The subscription-based model, however, is not the exclusive form that cable networks take, nor is it the only means through which ambitious programming can be successfully produced. When I discuss the success of the subscription model throughout this chapter, I do not mean to refer exclusively to programming on subscription cable channels. Beginning early in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, as HBO began to show sings of success, many “basic cable” networks, including AMC, borrowed some of HBO’s winning strategies. Basic cable networks rely on a combination of advertising and subscription sales for revenue, situating their business model somewhere between that of traditional broadcast TV and that of premiere cable. Thus, with a few alterations to accommodate for the role of advertising, these networks were able to successfully integrate subscription-style strategies into their marketing and programming, playing up their niche appeal and their distinction from broadcast offerings. When Matt Weiner started \textit{Mad Men} at AMC in 2006, he brought with him a number of professionals whom he had worked with on \textit{The Sopranos} on HBO—including director Alan Taylor, director and cinematographer Phil Abraham, and producer Scott Hornbacher—further solidifying the image of his basic cable series as
the offspring of the revolutionary program that ushered in the era of the elite cable drama.

The business model that HBO first perfected allowed for cable networks to gain a number of advantages over their broadcast competitors. For the half-century of the broadcast era, original programming followed certain guidelines. The standard program ran for a twenty-two to twenty-six episode season, with each episode airing once weekly, typically from September to May. Original programming on cable, however, began to experiment with these formats. By producing fewer series, with fewer episodes per season, cable networks were able to invest more money in each of their programs, raising the production value of each episode. They also freed themselves from the scheduling restraints of broadcast TV, airing only a few programs at a time throughout the year, and occasionally re-airing episodes throughout the week. Furthermore, while broadcast programming was burdened by its “roots in the public interest” and its dependence on advertising revenue that required “the maintenance of decency standards,” cable networks were not subject to the same FCC and industrial regulations.16

Despite such industrial advantages, which seemed to separate cable from broadcast TV, the subscription model was not independent of the market. Maintaining a relatively broad audience base was still in the best interest of HBO and other cable networks. However, the specificity of the subscription model, with its direct transaction between network and viewer, allowed for a distinction between cable programming and that of their broadcast competitors. Though cable networks were

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often owned by the same larger media conglomerates as broadcast networks, the subscription-based model encouraged both artists and network executives to perceive their programming as more independent and consumer-oriented than that of their larger broadcast rivals.

Cable networks emphasized their difference from commercial television largely through marketing strategies that presented their networks as a sanctuary for ambitious and sophisticated programming. Because premium cable channels relied on subscribers, they had to convince current and potential subscribers that the programming they offered was worth the extra fee. HBO, for example, made use of promotion and marketing to construct a recognizable brand that would immediately call to a viewer’s mind the characteristics that set HBO apart from the rest of television. Because “typical” television programming was often regarded as a vessel for mass tastes (“least objectionable programming”), HBO succeeded by convincing viewers that subscription to their network would ensure “their membership in a cultural vanguard.”

A certain level of cultural capital thus became attached to the network—a television viewer’s subscription to HBO came to say something about their tastes and cultural standing. As media scholar Christopher Anderson explains, “in order to ensure HBO’s continuing economic value for subscribers, the network [had to] establish a unique cultural value among television networks.”

Thus, in their attempt to create a brand that would appeal to a niche of wealthy, educated viewers, HBO insisted on its “antitelevisuality.” With the introduction of the slogan “It’s Not TV. It’s HBO,” the ground-breaking premium

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18 Anderson, 30.
19 Jaramillo, 65.
cable network once again established what would soon become a norm in the cable business model. With this straightforward slogan, the subscription cable network denied its connection to a notoriously mass medium and thus reached out to viewers who would hopefully find its type of avowedly non-televisual television programming attractive. AMC followed with the slogan, “Story Matters Here.” The basic cable network was launching a new original series in an attempt to remain relevant, as it was faced with fierce competition from broadcast, subscription cable, and other basic cable networks. Just as HBO emphasized that it was “Not TV,” AMC focused on convincing viewers that what they offered “here” couldn’t be found elsewhere. Like HBO, AMC explicitly positioned themselves against broadcast TV, which had been giving increasing prominence to “reality TV” programming.

The branding of cable as a refuge for elite viewers went well beyond the creation of a slogan to become a central part of HBO’s self-image and what television scholar Avi Santo calls its “culture of production.” Journalist Tad Friend notes the tendency of HBO executives stress “its riskier, artier ventures.” Although “the channel’s highest-rated programming” after The Sopranos consisted of “boxing and ‘Real Sex’ . . . nobody at HBO ever started a discussion with me about boxing or blowup dolls,” Friend observes. Similarly, HBO promoted TV criticism and “helped to elevate the status of television criticism in general.” Publications like The New York Times began giving a great deal of attention to The Sopranos, in hopes of attracting a similar demographic as HBO, HBO then made use of their “public relations machinery,” encouraging people to pay attention to the press coverage. By

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20 Santo, 34.
transforming TV critics into widely read sources of analysis, HBO ensured that they would be “more effective agents in the production of cultural value.”

As cable television prospered in the early years of the 21st century, television critics were drawn to a particular metaphor for illustrating the distinction of the newly flourishing cable drama series, often describing it as novelistic in style and content. However, the comparison between cable drama and literary form seems more relevant in examining the industrial practices that allowed the cable drama to succeed, than in describing its style and content. The particular mode of television storytelling that developed around the turn of the century can be attributed to a conflation of factors that created the right industrial and regulatory environment for the subscription model to succeed. A century earlier, in the late 1800s, a very similar set of practices developed in the publishing industry. During this period, “literary production” became increasingly defined by the growth of the publishing market and the transformation of “the written word” into “a commodity, bought and sold like other articles of commerce.” As modes of production and distribution changed, making the production of books cheaper and available to a wider range of readers, publishing transformed into a marketplace, introducing a reliance on profitability and readership to the literary world.

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22 Anderson, 38.
Within this context, literary realism flourished and novelists like William Dean Howells and Henry James asserted their desire to “rescue literature from the whims of the marketplace.”

As publishing became an increasingly crowded field—the number of publishing firms quadrupled between 1860 and 1910—the class status of the readership for a particular genre or type of publication became important and publishers could target a specific class with books tailored to their interests.

Realists grew concerned that the publishing industry was responding to the desires of an “inferior class,” who read fiction not “to give direction to the better sort of writer,” but “merely for amusement.” Because the realist style relied “on readers’ educated sense of the nonfictional world,” these writers tended to dismiss “working-class modes of reading.” This rejection depended on publishing venues that seemed to be insulated from the increasingly commercialized world of publishing. Searching for a niche of wealthy and educated readers whom they believed could best appreciate their work, realists turned to subscription-based magazines. William Dean Howells explained why he preferred subscription magazines to book publishing:

Most of the best literature now first sees the light in the magazines, and most of the second-best appears first in book form... At present the magazines... form the most direct approach to that part of our reading public which likes the highest things in literary art. Their readers, if we may judge from the quality of the literature they get, are more refined than the book readers in our community.

As the realist style developed at the end of the 19th century, these writers came to regard subscription-based media as the most direct way to reach a

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25 Borus, 58.
26 Ibid., 41.
27 Sarah Wadsworth, In the Company of Books (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 5.
28 Borus, 115.
29 William Dean Howells quoted in Borus, 117-118.
particular segment of elite readers. These magazines’ relied on a distinct type of commercial activity, based not on attracting a mass audience, but on finding a sufficient number of readers wealthy enough to pay for their publications. The subscription basis of their business model allowed writers and magazine employees to think of themselves as an alternative to the unsophisticated world of mass book publication. Realism stood in contrast to the more popular “melodramatic, sentimental, and sensational work of fiction.”  

The success of realist works in subscription-based magazines at the end of the 19th century emerges as a parallel to the success of the complex long-form drama on subscription cable networks at the end of the 20th century. Just as the elite subscription magazines of the late 19th century provided ambitious novelists with a distinct venue for their works, cable programming in the 1990s gave opportunity to a cohort of ambitious artists. Cable channels, more so than broadcast networks, attracted a particular type of talented television producer and writer—Chase and Weiner, for example, but also David Simon, David Milch, and Alan Ball, among others. The primary basis of this attraction was the same reason that realist writers were drawn to magazines—the reality that the business model of the subscription-based cable industry, particularly for premium cable channels, drew a smaller, but wealthier and more educated, audience than their broadcast competitors. Deborah Jaramillo describes premium cable channels as “a form of television for the age of the gated community.” As Jaramillo points out, HBO attracted an “already-privileged demographic base to work with: these

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viewers ha[d] the extra $10 per month to spend on HBO in addition to the $18 to $20 average for basic cable.”

As a basic cable channel, AMC didn’t automatically have as privileged an audience at their fingertips. But the network and *Mad Men* in particular addressed wealthy and well-educated viewers. The series drew 49% of viewers 25 to 54 who made over $100,000 a year, the highest percentage of this demographic among basic cable original series. The act of subscribing to premium cable networks, like HBO, or of tuning in to specific cable programming, like *Mad Men*, separated such viewers “from the masses who [had to] settle for ‘must see TV.’”

The fact that cable networks could remain economically viable with this small, but elite, viewership certainly helped to lead producers like Chase and Weiner to create and air their series on these channels. The cable networks’ pursuit of profitability in a competitive market; the producers’ desire to create ambitious work free from the limitations of network television; the cable audience’s search for inventive programming that spoke specifically to their interests—all of these factors combined to allow for the success of original drama series on cable networks. This success can certainly be measured economically, but it had equally important consequences in the aesthetic distinction of these series. To ensure that viewers continued to choose their channel’s programming above all others, cable networks were, “in a sense . . .

31 Jaramillo, 63.
33 Santo, 32.
forced to take risks,”34 driving them to choose projects whose writers and producers were committed to programming that was unique and highly complex in form, style, content and theme.

As with their predecessors among late 19th century novelists, the creators of cable drama understood themselves to be challenging pop cultural fantasy with an unusually demanding realism. Chase and Weiner often expressed their desire to depict life as it really was.35 This devotion to realism stood in contrast to the easy watching of simplistic and unrealistic content and form that they saw as characterizing broadcast series, which had to maintain broad appeal and please advertisers. The narrative style of The Sopranos and Mad Men—incorporating slow pacing, frequent silences, and gradually developing storylines—became a crucial part of their distinction. Hour-long dramas on premium cable, without the intrusion of advertising, were longer than so-called hour-long dramas on commercial networks—around fifty-five minutes instead of forty-five. The lack of commercial breaks also allowed the shows to flow more naturally, instead of having to incorporate mini-climaxes every fifteen minutes to ensure that viewers would return after commercials. The structures afforded to subscription-based networks allowed producers to have their story unfold “through [an] expansive

34 Tony Kelso, “And Now No Word From Our Sponsor: How HBO Puts the Risk Back Into Television” in It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era (see note 8), 49.
temporality,” as Dana Polan explains, and to “introduce . . . [their] audience[s] to an ever greater narrative universe.”36

With higher production values, and fewer commercial restrictions, shows like Mad Men and The Sopranos were able to depict an apparently more realistic world, one whose features and narrative design were distinguished by the way they resisted expectations fostered in broadcast TV. The producers, for example, often chose not to follow the typical pacing of the serial broadcast series in which events visibly built to an inevitable conclusion coming at the end of a season. For example, Tony visits Dr. Melfi fairly consistently over The Sopranos’ six seasons. His therapy, however, does not build to a final resolution. He and Melfi experience minor revelations and temporary setbacks, but they hardly ever make real progress. These programs craft layers of meandering stories with dozens of characters, both significant and insignificant in the larger plot. They frequently refuse to present clear and concise narratives, leaving many stories unresolved.

The freedom from industrial and government regulation that premium cable channels enjoyed also resonated with their aspiration to present television that depicted real life. The Sopranos took full advantage of HBO’s freedom from FCC regulations, as the show’s frequent use of graphic sex, brutal violence, and adult language arguably became its most distinguishing and talked-about features. While these depictions could be (and frequently were) interpreted as “tacked on to titillate,” the nature of the series encouraged its viewers to consider the sex and violence as “flow[ing] organically out of its subject matter—the

audience believes that members of the mob swear frequently and hang out in strip clubs,” and thus, it plunges them more fully into the highly realistic mafia world.\(^{37}\)

By exploiting the freedom of premium cable to the fullest measure, *The Sopranos* also pushed itself as far from broadcast programming as it possibly could and appealed to viewers to wished to consider the shows they watched as separate from mass tastes. Viewers of commercial television wouldn’t find programming that featured the fatal beating of a stripper, the explicit depiction of Ralph Cifaretto’s bizarre sexual practices, or a major character high on heroin sitting on and suffocating his girlfriend’s dog. HBO’s elite viewers accepted this explicit content, and instead of being considered as crass or unsophisticated, they could feel that they were being presented with a gritty and realistic story world.

*Mad Men* has not had the same freedom to feature risqué material. Basic cable forced the program to adhere to many broadcast regulations and practices. But following the lead established by Chase and *The Sopranos*, Matt Weiner often insisted on the clarity of his artistic vision despite these limitations. “I really never imagined it being any more than it is in terms of language . . . I really haven’t felt any restriction to it,” he explained in an interview. “I think there’s a kind of elegance to it, to work within that framework where what you don’t see is often more enticing”\(^{38}\)

Because television, whether cable or broadcast, is a commercial medium, David Chase was also forced to work through some limitations. One famous

\(^{37}\) Rogers et al., 53.

\(^{38}\) Weiner, interview by Tobias.
example was Chase’s struggle with HBO executives surrounding the “College” episode early in season one of *The Sopranos*. This was the episode that followed Tony and Meadow on their father-daughter college visit to Maine, and it featured Tony sneaking away to strangle a man who had previously betrayed him—Tony’s first murder shown on the series. “HBO said you can’t do this,” Chase explained in an interview, going on to describe what the network told him: “You’ve built up the most interesting protagonist on television in the past 25 years, and now you’re just going to lose it.” Chase argued that to have Tony decide not to kill this man would be so noticeably unrealistic “that we’d lose viewers.” HBO eventually allowed the murder to be shown, granting the network an opportunity to prove its commitment to programming willing to take risks and possibly to alienate viewers. The episode became a favorite among viewers, exemplifying early in the show’s run the tension that would be so appealing to the premium cable audience, whose lives were both reflected and subverted in Tony and Meadow’s college trip.

The controversy surrounding this particular episode played into the artistic self-understanding that the new cable environment nurtured. Chase emerged as a figure who refused to pander to his audience, who was willing to fight for his artistic vision against a network whose commercial interests were attempting to hold him, and the show, back. Of course, the image of the cable producer as champion of art against the network’s commercial interests was not at all inconsistent with the economic model of HBO. To ensure that a media

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savvy audience would subscribe to their network, HBO wanted to be regarded as a refuge for art in an overwhelmingly commercial world.

Thus encouraged, television auteurs like Weiner and Chase frequently made use of rhetoric that positioned them as defenders of ambitious programming in an environment that seemed to insist primarily on viewership and profitability. Both producers took advantage of their frequent interviews to emphasize their role in the triumph of artistic vision and their distinction from the world of broadcast television. In an extensive profile of Weiner in *The New York Times*, Weiner describes the struggle he faced in pitching *Mad Men* to various networks. “They said, ‘There is too much smoking,’ or ‘Don is too unlikeable.’ And I’m like, ‘I write on *The Sopranos*, and I’m watching the most on-paper unlikeable person in the world.’ Well, guess what? Jim Gandolfini played that person, and it made a huge difference. So I wrote it.”40 In the same interview, Weiner describes his directions to his actors. “I want them not to pay too much attention to each other, so it feels real, more perfunctory. Not that TV thing.”

Perhaps no television professional was as consistently disparaging toward the medium as David Chase. In another *Times* article, Chase presents his explanation of what his show offered that broadcast programming did not:

> Network television is all talk. I think there should be visuals on a show, some sense of mystery to it, connections that don’t add up. I think there should be dreams and music and dead air and stuff that goes nowhere. There should be, God forgive me, a little bit of poetry.”41

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At their respective networks, Chase and Weiner worked hard to inject this “little bit of poetry” into their programming, striving to judge their professional work as something more than just commercial output. The fight between Chase and HBO is one example of this attempt, but Weiner also became part of a feud with AMC when they wanted to cut each Mad Men episode by two minutes in order to incorporate more commercials. Weiner publically refused to accept this decision, and eventually AMC conceded, allowing the show to run two minutes longer each week to accommodate extra advertising time. As one journalist explained, adopting Weiner’s perspective, “for a show as immersive as Mad Men, each commercial break arguably represents more of a disruption than it does for sitcoms or more formulaic dramas.” By holding out for those two minutes, Weiner emerged as a producer who refused to endanger the quality of his series, and AMC proved itself “willing to make the accommodation for the critically acclaimed jewel of its lineup.”

Nevertheless, both Weiner and Chase inevitably had to make some concessions to the fact that they were working in a commercial medium. In The Sopranos, for example, HBO began to make use of “product placement” in order to lower production costs. However, in order to keep the series seemingly free of commercial interests—a primary draw of premium cable networks—Chase presented the product placement as being used purposefully to enhance the realism of the show. One admiring article about HBO’s product placement thus referred to Chase as “a

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43 Kelso, 52.
stickler. When Carmela Soprano reaches for milk, he demands it be a brand
distributed in New Jersey.”

_Mad Men_ had to contend with even more commercial interests, as advertising
profits remained a significant portion of AMC’s revenue. Product integration played a
key role in the series, which was often a risky strategy, as it’s difficult to make
products and brands noticeable enough to please advertisers while integrating them
into the visual environment so as not to disturb the viewer. Luckily, or strategically,
the subject matter and setting of _Mad Men_ allows product integration to be both
organic and obvious. Matt Weiner declared that product integration can “drive . . .
audiences away if it makes them feel they’re being sold something in the middle of
their entertainment . . . I really don’t want advertising dictating the contents of the
show.” However, it’s likely he understood that there was perhaps no better way to
ensure that advertising could be integrated unobtrusively into his show than by
focusing on a group of professionals who use the names of products and companies
constantly in their daily life. And while _Mad Men_ had to additionally incorporate
traditional 30-second commercials, Weiner insisted that “you can do a lot with a
commercial break—you can change days, you can suggest the passage of time. So
sometimes it’s a great thing artistically, to know that it’s going to be there.”

The ambiguity of television programming, falling somewhere between work
of art and commodity, certainly worried Chase and Weiner. They responded to this

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44 Michael McCarthy, “HBO Shows Use Real Brands,” _USA Today_ 3 Dec. 2002,
http://www.usatoday.com/money/advertising/2002-12-02-sopranos_x.htm.
45 Lotz, 168.
47 Weiner, interview by Tobias.
tension not only by publically insisting on the artistic quality of their works but also by layering commentary about mass media and commercial TV into the fabric of their programs. This tendency among professionals in subscription-based media was exhibited a century earlier by the 19th century realist novelists who wrote “in an age when the novel was clearly a commodity” and therefore “struggl[ed] to differentiate what they did from what the business men and women of words did.” Their primary methods included “portraying the world of which [their work] was a part so convincingly that it matched readers’ experience of the world,” echoing the idea in cable television at the end of the 20th century that a program’s commercial specificity accurately mirrored the reality of their viewers’ consumer-driven lives. But additionally, realist writers built their stories around encounters with commercial media, implying by contrast that the novels themselves could escape “commodity status.” The realist novel is full of sleazy journalists, hack novelists, and manipulative popular melodrama. In depicting such low entertainment, realist novelists implied that they rose above its limitations. The horror film Cleaver that Christopher produces in The Sopranos is used in a similar way. The mobsters’ desire for a mass commercial hit leads them to create a generic film that’s “Godfather meets Saw.” Most importantly, Christopher recruits J.T., a television writer for broadcast series like Law and Order, to write the script. For Chase and Weiner, using their narratives to explore the tension between the lure of “poetry” and the reality of economic profitability became a method of responding to the tension within their own professional lives.

48 Borus, 61-64.
The conflict that Tony Soprano wrestles with throughout the series, attempting to reconcile the image he has of himself with the image he projects to others, can be seen as one aspect of Chase’s response to this tension. On some level Tony does recognize the brutality of what he does as a mobster. But more often, he insists on a wounded, damaged, and tragically poetic vision of his own life. In the pilot, he confesses to a skeptical Dr. Melfi that he feels like others see him as “the sad clown.” And he consistently laments the absence of a Gary Cooper-inspired “strong silent type” in his world that he sees as characterized by a pervasive discussion of feelings and complaints (which provides an interesting parallel to Chase’s description of broadcast television as “all talk”). From the first episode of the series, Chase introduces this tension as a key issue of the program, with Tony being simultaneously a ruthless killer and a man of hidden psychological anxiety who cares for ducks. Tony is unmistakably a part of the mafia world, but has a tendency to see himself as an exception, convincing himself that he has thoughts and feelings that are somehow more profound than those of the men who surround him, only further highlighted in the series’ frequent submersion into Tony’s dream sequences and memories.

Chase subtly uses Tony’s inner conflict as a framework for the tension he feels working in a medium that he had never really respected, always feeling that he had to prove his own artistry. Weiner’s take on this conflict is somewhat more explicit, helped by the fact that his series depicts a business that is more closely related to the television industry. In *Mad Men*, Don Draper emerges as a champion of a more artistic brand of advertising that resists kitsch. The show allows the viewer to witness the ad campaigns that come to him in moments of creative inspiration, like

49 “Pilot,” Season 1 Episode 1.
with the “It’s Toasted” campaign for Lucky Strike in the pilot. But over the course of the series, Don begins to doubt the value of what he does, recognizing the pull of commerce and wealth. “You’re not an artist,” he tells Peggy at the beginning of the third season.\(^{50}\) And while he continues to offer inspiring visions of creative advertising, he does so with an increasingly indifferent attitude. In the first episode of the second season, he begins crafting his ad pitch for Mohawk airlines with his usual brilliance—“It’s about a fantastical people who are taking you someplace you’ve never been”—before trailing off with a detached “blah, blah, blah.”\(^{51}\)

The business model of HBO and other cable programs at the turn of the millennium both produced this tension between art and commerce for the television auteur, and encouraged them to reflect on it in the content of their programming. Media-savvy viewers of cable dramas in turn were likely to pick up on this type of self-reflexivity. Many cable programs chose to insert cultural allusions into their programming to reward their audience. \textit{The Sopranos} is rife with mob movie references, as the characters themselves are invested in this particular brand of popular culture. But the series gives equal weight to references that specifically flatter their professional class audience. The series did not have music composed specifically for the show, opting instead to use an eclectic range of well known, often ironically placed songs, most distinctively in the closing credits of each episode. Steven Van Zandt, a member of Bruce Springsteen’s E Street Band and the actor playing capo Silvio Dante, worked with David Chase on the music selection. In one particularly satirical moment, Christopher quotes Springsteen lyrics to Silvio as his

\(^{50}\) “Love Among the Ruins,” Season 3 Episode 2.
\(^{51}\) “For Those Who Think Young,” Season 2 Episode 1.
excuse for being late, telling him, "the highway was jammed with broken heroes on a last-chance power drive."\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Mad Men} gives a nod to its roots in the corporate fiction of the postwar period by having Jimmy Barrett address Don as “the man in the gray flannel suit.”\textsuperscript{53}

The producers of these series similarly acknowledge that their viewers are familiar with, and probably disdain, conventional storytelling methods. Dana Polan notes that “\textit{The Sopranos} is a work of popular culture deeply invested in irony, but an often playful one caught up in the undoing of each and every certainty we try to formulate about the show.”\textsuperscript{54} The writers and producers of these shows are aware of their audience’s expectations, and of the value in subverting these expectations. Polan cites as an example of this the way that all of season two of \textit{The Sopranos} seems like a slow build to Tony’s eventual need to kill Richie Aprile. Instead and unexpectedly, Tony’s sister Janice shoots him almost immediately after he punches her. As Polan points out, this surprising, anticlimactic event does not even occur in the season finale.\textsuperscript{55} Similarly, while many \textit{Mad Men} viewers surely expected some sort of drama when British executives visit Sterling-Cooper during the third season, it’s safe to bet that no one expected that one young Brit would have his foot chopped off by a lawnmower in the middle of the Sterling Cooper offices before the episode’s end. This sort of conscious subversion of audience expectations adds prominently to the unique viewing experience of cable drama.

\textsuperscript{52} Quoting “Born to Run” in “Long Term Parking,” Season 5 Episode 12.
\textsuperscript{53} “Six Month Leave,” Season 2 Episode 9.
\textsuperscript{54} Polan, \textit{The Sopranos} 9.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 59-60.
The programs don’t only use audience flattery in their attempt to “break the larger, paying audience into a more well-defined niche” consisting largely of the professional class.56 Dana Polan highlights the way that “The Sopranos also plays with—and even mocks—the values of the members of that demographic.”57 As much as Tony and Carmela mirror the practices of the professional class, the true members of this demographic are often depicted as unflattering and caricatured. For example, the couple from whom Tony buys the Whitecaps beach house, in the finale of season four, was laughable in their pretension and social striving. From their names—Alan Sapinsly and Trish Reingold-Sapinsly—to Trish’s toast to Alan’s “sharkfin soup” at their dinner party, to the moment when Alan refers to himself as “A.S.,” these characters just seem pitifully uncool. The program often moves beyond this comedic depiction to show the uglier side of the professional class. At one point, FBI Agent Sanseverino belittles the sensitive Adriana, their newest informant, repeating her description of Tony to her colleagues in a ridiculing voice, “We don’t know him. He’s really nice. He listens.”58 This depiction is not wholly inconsistent with the program’s desire to flatter its educated viewers—it allows viewers to see caricatures of themselves and to then feel superior to these exaggerations.

In keeping with this approach, both The Sopranos and Mad Men depict class-based worlds, at once highly similar and wholly different from the realities and practices of viewers’ own lives. The struggles that the characters of these programs face in navigating between the commitments of work and family life, for example, would be familiar to many viewers. However, the shows highlight not only this

56 Jaramillo, 69.
57 Polan, The Sopranos 72.
58 “Irregular Around the Margins,” Season 5 Episode 5.
similarity but also the distance between the world of the viewer and the story world of the show. The practice of projecting the issues of the professional class into an unfamiliar environment is characteristic of most of the shows that have flourished under the subscription cable model over the past decade. These unfamiliar environments range from the New Jersey mafia, to 1960s Madison Avenue, to Mormon polygamists (in HBO’s *Big Love*), to a teacher-led high school drug ring (in AMC’s *Breaking Bad*), to the late 19th century frontier West (in HBO’s *Deadwood*). Each of these programs uses these culturally or historically distant settings to depict the sufferings of talented individuals who struggle to negotiate highly complex and ruthlessly competitive worlds. This formal strategy allows the shows to address the interests of the professional class, while also presenting them with conflicts that seem more foreign, perhaps exaggerating them in an effort to illuminate the unlikely similarities between the two worlds.

Above all, these programs highlight anxiety and competition, presenting concerns that resonated with their viewers and setting their narratives apart from broadcast fare. While other programming certainly has its share of conflict, even the most highly-regarded quality programs on network TV rarely present the pervasive level of anxiety and competition that these series emphasize in practically every episode. In part, this aspect of *Mad Men* and *The Sopranos* can be attributed to Weiner and Chase’s desire to explore the extreme competition inherent in the television industry. More importantly, however, this particular thematic concern fits with the anxieties of contemporary professional and familial life. Both *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* do not only depict their protagonists as dreamers in a commercial
world; they show these figures to be under the stress of brutal competition. The very opening credits of *Mad Men* highlights this theme—a man in a suit whose office walls crumble around him, leaving him to fall endlessly past enormous colored advertisements.

*Stills from the opening credits of Mad Men*

The male characters in these series inhabit incredibly competitive and unstable professional worlds, and they constantly grapple with frustrating bureaucracy and with their individual control being wrested away from them. If there’s one thing to be learned from watching *The Sopranos* in its entirety, it’s that the stress of the mob environment can lead to panic attacks, betrayal, and murder, and that there’s always another man to replace the one who falls. Tony frequently laments the fact that they no longer live in the “good old days” of the mafia, where rules were more clear-cut and respect was part of the job. *Mad Men*’s Sterling Cooper is a third-tier ad agency that’s clearly tied to tradition in an increasingly modernized industry, forcing the agency to constantly assert itself against larger, more progressive firms. The firm’s control over its own fate is constantly being tested, particularly when it’s bought by
Putnam, Powell, and Lowe, and a season later when it’s threatened to be bought by McCann Erickson. “I’m sick of being batted around like a ping-pong ball,” Don angrily exclaims when Sterling Cooper is repeatedly sold to these larger, more modern firms.59

The competitive basis of the depiction of the male characters’ professional lives on these programs helped to maintain the interest of the upscale viewer, but it also served another purpose for the cable network. Part of the anxiety that plagues these professional networks of competitive men is their constant conflict with social worlds in which women apparently have more power, for example, Carmela’s constant tight-lipped, steely gaze that follows Tony around the house, or the towering images of women and families that the tiny cartoon businessman falls past in the opening credits of *Mad Men*. This focus on the masculine has been key in establishing the cable networks’ elite cultural standing. Throughout its history, television, along with other mass media, has been considered a feminine medium. One of the major goals of subscription-based media has been to draw more men into their audience by injecting a masculine sensibility into the feminized, commercialized marketplace. Here, too, the contemporary cable drama echoes attitudes that were earlier prominent among realist novelists. Writers like Howells and James “were born to, and then established themselves against, the maternal tradition of Anglo-American women’s fiction,” considering themselves to be at odds with a mass audience of

female readers.\textsuperscript{60} They sought to extend their readership to men by satirizing sentimental novels and by depicting “masculine enterprises.”\textsuperscript{61}

Cable dramas adopted a similar approach, choosing to depict overwhelmingly masculine professional worlds and self-consciously focusing on small groups of highly competitive men, often in conflict with the women surrounding them. In fact, it began to seem that an emphasis on clearly masculine subject matter was a prerequisite for any successful cable series, helping to define this elite programming with a particular style and form. The most successful and engaging cable programming adopted this masculine sensibility. A few cable series with female leads were produced during these years (including \textit{Damages} on FX, and \textit{Weeds} and \textit{Nurse Jackie} on Showtime), but, with the exception of \textit{Sex and the City}, they rarely achieved the status or acclaim of the male-centered cable series, the list of which is much more extensive (HBO’s \textit{The Sopranos}, \textit{Oz}, \textit{Deadwood}, \textit{The Wire}, \textit{In Treatment}, and \textit{Big Love}; Showtime’s \textit{Dexter} and \textit{Californication}; FX’s \textit{Rescue Me}, \textit{Nip/Tuck}, and \textit{The Shield}; and AMC’s \textit{Mad Men} and \textit{Breaking Bad}). As the first ten years of the century came to a close, journalist Alessandra Stanley declared that television in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century “was ushered in by a He Decade” with dramas focusing “narrowly on the male mind.”\textsuperscript{62}

However, in order to maintain a wide enough appeal to remain economically viable, the cable networks and programs also had to incorporate ways of speaking to female viewers. Despite their emphasis on the masculine, \textit{The Sopranos} and \textit{Mad Men}\.\textsuperscript{60 Alfred Habegger, \textit{Gender, Fantasy, and Realism in American Literature} (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982), ix.  
\textsuperscript{61} Borus, 112.  
Men draw quite a bit from traditionally feminine themes and genres. Seriality was, until the development of “quality drama” in the 1980s, a technique used mainly by soap operas. Turn of the millennium cable dramas adapted the form and some of the material of this genre. While these programs may have been “stories of men out in the world doing violence to other men,” there was an equal devotion to “the domestic sphere, to family and familial conflict and affirmation, to interpersonal interaction.”

Genre blending became a key characteristic of this type of program.

Thus, while the focus of these programs may have been more obviously masculine, it was not at the expense of speaking to stories and issues that interested and affected women. The female influence on these programs is equally strong, and is enforced not simply by inserting women and family into the series as foils to male characters. In one interview, David Chase acknowledged the centrality of family within his series: “The Sopranos wouldn’t exist if I hadn’t had a kid. I wouldn’t have known to make a family drama . . . And that’s so much a part of it that it wouldn’t . . . that show would not exist right now.”

Seven of Mad Men’s nine writers were women during the production of the third season, with women directing five of thirteen episodes, a rarity in the male-dominated entertainment industry. On a show that often incorporates real-life stories from its writers’ lives into the series, the majority presence of female writers turns out to be of further importance.

However, it’s not simply that these programs integrate this “feminine” material into their stories. More importantly, they do so by focusing on an inherent conflict between men and women, between the male-dominated workplace and the

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63 Polan, The Sopranos 43.
female-dominated home. With this conflict comes the preoccupation with family, marriage, and parenting, transforming these gendered issues into perhaps the key subject of both programs.
“WHAT MAKES YOU THINK YOU’RE SO SPECIAL?”¹: THE MAFIA AND MADISON AVENUE AS PASTORAL

In his review of Mad Men’s third season, Benjamin Schwarz links the program’s “defiant indictment of [the] sexism and racism” of the early 1960s to the tendency of its audience “to indulge in a most unlovely—because wholly unearned—smugness.” According to Schwarz, the show’s success can be attributed to the viewers’ stance toward “unenlightened” characters. “We all like to congratulate ourselves,” he continues, “and as a group, Mad Men’s audience is probably particularly prone to this temptation.”² Although critics generally praise Mad Men, when they do find fault with the series they generally point to a similar sense of superiority that they believe attracts viewers to the program.³

Schwarz notes the importance of what he refers to as the “alien world” aspect of Mad Men. The television viewers who choose to watch this program are inextricable from their specific social context as educated, wealthy members of the professional class in the 21st century. Therefore it’s inevitable, and intentional on the

³ According to Clive James, the show’s audience is drawn to an “illusion . . . of a past when even the smartest people weren’t quite as smart as us . . . Mad Men is a marketing campaign: what it sells is a sense of superiority, and it sells brilliantly.” Clive James, “Mad About Mad Men,” Australian Weekend Review 20 Apr. 2009, http://www.clivejames.com/mad-aboutmadmen; For Sam Schulman, Mad Men proclaims that “the triumph of feminism has raised us all to a higher plane . . . The show’s message is that we owe nothing to the past. It assumes that we must be delighted to measure our excellence against the faults of the world in which our parents and grandparents lived.” Sam Schulman, “The Television Show That Says You’re Better Than Your Parents,” Commentary (Feb. 2009): 46-48.
part of the creators, writers, and producers, that the audience views the story world as somewhat foreign. The painstakingly detailed postwar environment that the show recreates carries with it its own ideologies and institutions. We are invited to recognize that in many ways, the lives of the characters are quite different from our own. When watching *Mad Men*, viewers are transported to a world that they know only through memory or through studying history. The program’s distinct style calls attention to this difference, allowing the viewer to enter a world where women wear richly colored dresses that are always nipped in just-so at the waist, businessmen drink glass after glass of whiskey at work, and phrases like “That’s a sticky wicket” roll naturally off the tongue.

*The Sopranos* builds a much different, but just as fully realized world, where thick New Jersey accents transform the oft-spoken word “whore” into something closer to “hoo-ah,” and where a pork store and a strip club seem like natural places to conduct business. The program similarly relies on transporting its audience to a world saturated with sexism and racism. The mafia world of *The Sopranos* is contemporaneous to our own, but it comes with a set of rules that render it barely less antiquated than the 1960s world of *Mad Men*. The advertising men of Sterling Cooper often treat their secretaries merely as objects to ogle; the mob men in *The Sopranos* work out of the Bada Bing, a strip club, where the only women are even more literally objects for them to ogle. Betty Draper and Carmela Soprano are each expected to fulfill the role of devoted homemaker, raising the children, tending to the house, and having dinner waiting for her husband when he returns from work. Many of the characters on *Mad Men* have only harsh words for homosexuals, African-Americans,
and Jews. The characters on *The Sopranos* are hardly more accepting of people different from themselves. Tony refers to Meadow’s biracial African-American and Jewish boyfriend as “Jamaal Ginsburg, the Hasidic homeboy.” When Vito, one of Tony’s capos, comes out of the closet, most of Tony’s men immediately express their disgust, and their visceral desire to off him. The characters on both programs nonchalantly toss off comments that, in the 21st century culture of political correctness, members of the audience wouldn’t dare say in public.

Despite these similarities, *The Sopranos* did not receive the same criticism as *Mad Men* during its run. Perhaps the distance between the characters and the viewers of *The Sopranos* is greater—the characters on *Mad Men* could be viewers’ parents or grandparents, but the characters on *The Sopranos* exist in an entirely different professional and class world. Similarly, viewers have a less detailed sense of the “reality” of the mob than they do of the 1960s. Therefore, the critique that *Mad Men* misrepresents the past to allow viewers to feel superior would not transfer to *The Sopranos* because it would be harder to recognize any of the program’s artistic choices as exaggerations or misrepresentations of mob life.

No matter the reason for this critical distinction between the two series, they undoubtedly share a devotion to crafting an “alien world” that differs from the reality of their viewers’ own lives. This aesthetic choice may well evoke feelings of superiority among audience members who don’t face the same extreme circumstances that are presented on the programs. *Mad Men* in particular often invites viewers to take note of the things we know now, that the characters living fifty years ago did not. Notably, Betty Draper displays her lack of environmental consciousness when she

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*4 “The Telltale Moozadell,” Season 3 Episode 9.*
cleans up her family’s picnic by shaking their trash onto the grass and walking away.\textsuperscript{5}

The program similarly nods at the audience’s enlightenment when Betty and Don’s daughter Sally approaches Betty with a dry cleaning bag over her head. In the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, this sight would result in a parent hastily chastising the child for doing something dangerous. Betty, however, simply responds by warning her daughter, ”If the clothes from that dry cleaning bag are on the floor of my closet, you’re going to be a very sorry young lady.”\textsuperscript{6}

While these scenes often punctuate episodes of \textit{Mad Men}, they are typically unrelated to the overall story arcs, and intervene very little in our feelings toward the characters. Furthermore, the treatment of sexism in \textit{Mad Men} is more interesting than Schwarz gives it credit for. The fan dedication to \textit{Mad Men} and \textit{The Sopranos} cannot logically be attributed to viewers’ feelings of superiority toward the stories and characters they choose to interact with each week. Remaining a regular viewer of a serial television drama requires engagement and attachment to the program. It’s unlikely that viewers would dedicate hours of their limited leisure time to \textit{Mad Men} or \textit{The Sopranos}, week after week, season after season, if they watched solely to note the “unenlightened” behaviors and attitudes of these characters.

In order for a narrative to truly resonate with a particular demographic, it must address issues that the viewers have some stake in. A powerful narrative takes a tension that its viewers face in their daily life, one they struggle with, and stages this conflict. The way a story is told and the themes that it tackles must resonate with viewers on an ideological level, addressing viewers with a unique consideration of the

\textsuperscript{5} “The Gold Violin,” Season 2 Episode 7.
\textsuperscript{6} “Ladies Room,” Season 1 Episode 2.
personal and societal issues that affect them most. Considering the success of *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* among professional class viewers, it seems these programs have succeeded in finding a way to handle the issues that speak to this demographic, integrating the “alien world” that the characters inhabit with the realities of their viewers’ lives.

In his 1935 work of literary criticism *Some Versions of Pastoral*, William Empson interprets various seemingly disparate works, from Shakespearean drama to *Alice in Wonderland*, by framing each work through the lens of the pastoral. Empson defines the pastoral not as a genre about sheep and shepherds, but as a narrative structure that relies on the act of “simple people express[ing] strong feelings.” These narratives depict lives that are “so far from ours,” “a strange world” that is characterized by a combination of “unusually intellectual with unusually primitive ideas.” The transfer of the complex onto the simple, the “intellectual” onto the “primitive,” becomes a way to speak to a higher-class audience. According to Empson, the inherent incongruity of pastoral literature has the ability to evoke inconsistencies and tensions that resonate with this audience. More specifically:

> The feeling that life is essentially inadequate to the human spirit, and that a good life must avoid saying so, is naturally at home with most versions of pastoral; in pastoral you take a limited life and pretend it is the full and normal one, and [include] a suggestion that one must do this with all life, because the normal is itself limited.  

*The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* focus on lives that are certainly more limited than our own. However, instead of simply inviting their viewers, as Schwarz claims, to

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8 Ibid., 189, 143, 120.
9 Ibid., 114-115.
note these limitations and congratulate themselves for living in a world that has surpassed them, the programs insist that viewers consider the ways in which their lives are marked by similar, if less extreme, limitations. This is accomplished by mixing elements of what we would consider a “simple” environment with elements of our own “complex” environment. In *The Sopranos*, the “limited” is integrated with what would be considered “normal” to its viewers through its depiction of members of the mafia attempting to adhere to professional class lifestyle norms. Thus much of the tension, both comedic and dramatic, comes from watching these characters try to reconcile these two very different worlds. The “limited” in *Mad Men* derives largely from the restrictions of the time period. The “normal” comes more from a temporal transfer of modern issues onto the characters living in this more limited time. Unlike *The Sopranos*, where the characters themselves deal with problems relevant to viewers’ lives, *Mad Men* self-consciously integrates modern issues into the lives of characters who are not conscious of 21st century issues. The tension derives from watching the restrictions of everyday 1960s life that simultaneously embody the problems of a contemporary audience.

Considering Empson’s framework, it’s striking how many of the professional class tensions addressed in *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* revolve around the complexities and limitations of modern family life, particularly with regards to gender. *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* imagine their audiences to be made up of educated, wealthy viewers, and they work to engage this demographic by urging them to recognize the limitations of their own familial, marital, and parental choices. In the years surrounding the turn of the millennium, professional class adults struggled to
reconcile a vision of marriage as an ideal, equal and intimate partnership with the reality that marriage was an institution often based on inequality and self-interest. They struggled to reconcile reality with fantasy; romance with business; love with conflict. *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* dispel the notion of a simple solution to the contradictions their viewers face. Viewers turn to these programs to see their lives reflected in these deeply flawed, morally questionable, but always engaging characters who wrestle with exaggerated versions of the contradictions and frustrations that plague them most.

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Family life was one area in which professional class Americans around the turn of the millennium faced a range of contradictions and frustrations. In the 1960s and 70s, many Americans felt progress was being made as the restrictions of postwar family ideology were questioned and broken down. The institutions of marriage and family began to seem like opportunities for free, intimate and equal relationships. Following this hopeful period, the importance of family didn’t dissipate, but the enthusiasm became tempered with a feeling of reluctant acceptance. Family and marriage seemed necessary, but certainly not ideal. Historian Jill Lepore notes the shift toward “heightened expectations for marriage as a means of self-expression and personal fulfillment.” But these expectations stood in contrast to the fact “that some things—like the unglamorous and blessed ordinariness of buttering the toast every morning for someone you’re terribly fond of—just don’t get any better.”

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Echoing the professional class’s preoccupation with these issues, *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* place family and marriage at the center of their narratives. In fact, the connection between domestic realism and subscription media can be traced back to the late 19th century realist writers. Frank Norris derisively referred to realist fiction as “minute,” describing it as “the drama of a broken teacup, the tragedy of a walk down the block, the excitement of an afternoon call, the adventure of an invitation to dinner,” referencing the concern of novelists like William Dean Howells and Henry James with the seemingly trivial domestic matters of middle class families. A century later, cable dramas returned to a strikingly similar subject matter. Their preoccupation was not with epic or tragic romance, but with the daily realities of marriage and family, including the grinding disappointment and the low-level joys that seemed to characterize professional class family life during this time.

*Mad Men* and *The Sopranos* consistently focus on a narrow demographic range. They only occasionally refer to matters that fall outside of their narrow focus. *The Sopranos*, for instance, only alludes to the existence of the working class, like when A.J. dates Blanca during season 6, and the program depicts few African-Americans, single women, or homosexuals. *Mad Men* similarly alludes to the injustices of segregation and the plight of African-Americans, but only in small glimpses. Working class characters, like Don’s brother Adam and Peggy’s mother and sister, seem important for a short time, but eventually they fade away. Salvatore Romano begins to gain a more central place in the narrative, only to leave the program in the middle of season 3 when a client comes on to him and he refuses to

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give in to him. Both programs could depict these characters and issues as ordinary parts of their story worlds. Instead, these characters remain marginal, serving as foils to the characters on whom the shows focus, specifically white, professional class, heterosexual married couples. Their incredibly narrow focus is consistent with the programs’ preoccupation with a specific type of family life. The characters who aren’t able to achieve this lifestyle are not able to be full members of the narrative world, which is one of the problems with the family ideology of these years.

Initially, the central structural and narrative role that family plays within these programs seems counterintuitive. *Mad Men* and *The Sopranos* appear to be concerned with highly masculine depictions of men. However, the formal elements of the cable dramas that developed around the turn of the millennium provided a surprisingly ideal platform for the exploration of familial issues.

At the end of the fourth season of *The Sopranos* and the third season of *Mad Men*, the central couple in each series splits up in drawn out scenes of excruciating frustration and disappointment. By this time in each series, viewers had spent hours watching the interactions between Tony and Carmela Soprano, and Don and Betty Draper. The devoted viewer watched years of pent up frustration and irritation before each couple separates. Family is a constant, and constantly problematic, presence in the lives of the characters and thus, the expansive temporal narrative world is ideal for mimicking the real-life passage of time and the trajectory of a relationship. While first-time viewers could watch these dramatic episodes and understand their basic issues, the intense seriality of these cable dramas encourages long-term viewing. A viewer who had watched since the show’s debut, like the characters who accrued
these feelings and frustrations over the years, was meant to remember the intimate
details of the marriage depicted over multiple episodes and several seasons, making
them ever more invested in the story. In this way, the extended and unpredictable
pacing that flourished in the cable environment is exhibited particularly well in each
program’s depiction of the painful dissolution of their central couple’s marriage.

As hybridized dramas that combine professional drama with family drama, the
programs devote equal time to the work lives and home lives of their characters. In
these particular episodes that depict the separation of the Sopranos and the Drapers,
this is certainly the case. In the last episode of season four of *The Sopranos*, entitled
“Whitecaps,” the action shifts constantly between Tony and Carmela’s emotional and
physical fighting, and Tony and his New Jersey associates’ dealings with the rival
New York mafia family. The season finale of *Mad Men*’s third season switches
between Don and Betty finalizing their divorce, and Don and his coworkers leaving
Sterling Cooper to form a new advertising firm. The use of multistranded narratives
and genre blending allows for the realm of work and the realm of family to mutually
illuminate the tensions that characterize each environment.

The cable producers’ investment in crafting a realistic story world distinct
from the shallow illusions of broadcast television encourages them to explore the
grinding disappointment of marital and familial life. These producers are drawn to
depicting petty, selfish, vindictive, morally ambiguous characters, and in *The
Sopranos* and *Mad Men*, they use these characteristics to illustrate the mundane, ugly
aspects of family. Furthermore, characters that appear initially to be one-dimensional
are frequently rendered more complex by the addition of details concerning their
family life. This narrative technique is inherent in the premise *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men*, as each program’s flawed protagonist is the most complex character in large part because the viewer has more substantial access to the details of their family life.

This technique is used most explicitly to transform even the most despicable characters into ones that have motives and complexity. Viewers came to regard Ralph Cifaretto, a capo in Tony’s crew, as a man who lacked morals, was prone to violent outbursts, and once took a stripper who was pregnant with his child behind the Bada Bing and mercilessly beat her to death. However, when his son ends up in a coma after a bloody accident involving a bow and arrow in his backyard, Ralph’s transformation into devastated parent miraculously allows the viewer to sympathize with a sociopath. Throughout the first season of *Mad Men*, Pete Campbell, an account executive at Sterling Cooper, is portrayed as a smarmy, sexist creep, constantly the foil to Don Draper’s damaged, but likeable and suave persona. By reaching into Pete’s past to explore his issues with his father, and later by depicting his father’s untimely death, Pete’s flaws become attached to his difficult upbringing and he begins to be humanized.

**Shotgun/Marriage**

“We’re Italian—we don’t believe in divorce. We believe in the nuclear family.”

- Tony Soprano

In an essay on *The Sopranos*, Clive James describes how David Chase “rebelled by seizing the opportunity HBO uniquely offers and making another kind of

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12 “University,” Season 3 Episode 6.
13 “Whoever Did This,” Season 4 Episode 9.
television, a kind that tells fewer comforting lies.” The program’s televisual form, James contends, allows for a depiction of mob life that is particularly mundane and seamy. The male characters have “a frame of reference drenched with Godfather minutiae,” but they can only allude to the epic gangster film while “sitting out front at the Pork Store (their idea of the outdoor life) or lurking dimly in the depths of the Bada-Bing combined bar and strip-joint.”

While James focuses largely on the mafia aspects of the program, a similar description could be given to its depiction of family life. If the epic tale of The Godfather that permeates the mob world is replaced with the idealized 1950s family life that infuses Tony’s ideas of home, and the dingy Satriale’s Pork Store with the tense suburban Soprano house, the same kind of mundane and ugly vision applies to the family interactions on The Sopranos. Throughout the six seasons of The Sopranos, the overlap of mob life and family life creates the overriding tension of the program. The series was originally conceived by David Chase as the story of a mobster entering therapy to confront his troubles with his mother, but it ends up moving beyond this concept to incorporate an incredibly wide range of family storylines. Livia Soprano, Tony’s mother, dies at the beginning of the third season after Nancy Marchand, the actress who played Livia, passed away. Following two seasons in which Livia’s nastiness was a major focus of the series, the program had to reconfigure its concept in order to move beyond its initial conceit. While Livia’s menacing shadow hangs over the rest of the series—viewers easily recognize Tony frequently using Livia’s favorite phrase, “Poor you”—the program turns even more

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toward Tony’s nuclear family, and the families of other characters, in the remaining four seasons. Tony consistently remains at the center of the program—he is, after all, the link between the workplace and the home. Although it switches constantly between family and “Family” plotlines, the truly unique aspect of the show is its refusal to accept a clear delineation between the two spheres, insisting upon the bleakness that is so much a part of both.

“Whitecaps,” the season finale of the fourth season of The Sopranos, opens with a shot of Carmela Soprano sitting resignedly on an examining table in a doctor’s office, with a thermometer in her mouth, her stringy hair falling limply around her face. Behind Carmela sits Tony, sighing impatiently and staring at his watch. It’s a striking image with which to begin the episode, which, at an hour and fifteen minutes, is the longest in the series’ eight-year run. As viewers, we had grown accustomed to Carmela appearing in her immaculately matched outfits, slightly garish jewelry, and perfectly sculpted hairdos, just as we’d come to accept her own tight-lipped acceptance of the disappointments of marriage.

“Whitecaps” opens with this shot of Carmela at the doctor’s office
In the first episode of the first season, Tony and Carmela are in a similar hospital setting, with Carmela standing beside Tony as he worries about his recent panic attacks and waits to enter the MRI machine. When he waxes nostalgic and admits “no marriage is perfect,” Carmela responds bitingly, “Well, having that goomar on the side helps.” 16 The tense conversation ends with Carmela telling Tony, “What’s different between you and me is that you’re going to hell when you die.” At the beginning of the series, Carmela clearly expresses her feelings of moral superiority over Tony, exemplified by her close—and borderline inappropriate—relationship with her priest, and fairly frequent comments resembling the one above. 17

Although viewers can never quite ignore her involvement in her husband’s seedy business life, as the money he earns permeates all aspects of their life together, Carmela initially rejects this idea. Her protests about the conditions of their marriage are infrequent, and usually pertain to Tony’s infidelities, for which he is solely to blame. Although her refusal to acknowledge her own compliance with this lifestyle is so much a part of the first few seasons, it’s only articulated for the first time in the middle of the third season. Frightened by the desperate situation of Angie Bonpensiero—the wife of Big Pussy, one of Tony’s friends and associates whom Tony killed after finding out he was an FBI informant—Carmela decides to see a therapist of her own. She tells Dr. Krakower about Tony’s redeeming qualities, which echo the viewers’ own feelings about Tony: “He’s a good man. He’s a good father.” 18

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16 “Pilot,” Season 1 Episode 1.
17 In the first episode, when Tony tells her he’s going to start going to therapy, she also tells him, “Psychology doesn’t address the soul—that’s something else. But this is a start. It’s something.”
As boss of a Northern New Jersey crime family and patriarch of the Soprano family, Tony leads a dual life, which is an obvious subject of the program from its inception. He spends his days in strip clubs, before attending his daughter’s soccer games. He is simultaneously the paragon of brute masculinity, and the quintessential modern man in crisis, struggling to be a good father for his children and constantly trying to understand his own past and his own feelings. Viewers can revel in Tony’s utter freedom to go where he pleases, eat what he wants, and sleep with whomever he chooses. But we only feel real sympathy with him in relation to his family life.

While he is in total control as mob boss, being a member of a family in the 21st century requires a level of consideration and sacrifice that Tony struggles with. However, The Sopranos makes it clear that Tony truly does love Carmela and his children. As the series progresses, the disconnect between scenes of Tony beating and killing men or having sex with other women, and scenes of Tony sharing bowls of ice cream with A.J. or gazing lovingly at Carmela becomes less jarring than its initial appearance in the “College” episode. Viewers come to accept that Tony is a deeply flawed, sometimes sociopathic, character, but one who indisputably loves his family. The way in which viewers can be simultaneously aware of the overwhelming irony of this contradiction and genuinely invested in this character is one of the great feats of the program.\(^{19}\)

When Carmela gives these excuses to Dr. Krakower, however, the certainty and clarity of his professional response is unsettling simply because the show, the

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\(^{19}\) The deeply flawed and morally questionable, but loveable central male character, pioneered by The Sopranos, is replicated in almost all of the male-centered cable series mentioned in Chapter 2 (such as Mad Men, Breaking Bad, The Shield, and Dexter).
characters, and the viewers so consistently shy away from such blunt character descriptions:

You tell me he’s a depressed criminal, prone to anger, serially unfaithful. Is that your definition of a good man? You must trust your initial impulse and consider leaving him. You’ll never be able to feel good about yourself. You’ll never be able to quell the feelings of guilt and shame that you talked about, so long as you’re his accomplice.

His characterization of Tony and Carmela is on point, yet it seems entirely incongruous with the way the audience has come to see these characters, and with the way the characters see themselves.

Incongruity is a key aspect of Empson’s definition of the pastoral, and the often loving nature of the Soprano family is constantly held in tension with the ignored reality and violence of their own lives. This notion is perhaps expressed most explicitly in Tony and Carmela’s parenting, for it is primarily through their focus on their children that they strive to achieve something close to upper middle class status. Interestingly, it’s also through their parenting that the seedier aspects of their lives seem to integrate most fully with these professional class values. The fact that Tony’s first murder shown on the series occurs in an episode where he and his daughter are performing the distinctly professional class ritual of college visits (to liberal arts schools like Colby and Bates, no less) is hardly a coincidence. The inability to separate these two realms is an explicit subject of *The Sopranos*, and one that is obvious from the very beginning of the series.

It’s clear that Tony, as a made man, would face this contradiction, but what makes the series even more engaging is Carmela’s embodiment of the two distinct worlds. While Carmela likes to think of herself as an innocent bystander to the mob
dealings taking place under her nose, her knowledge and absorption of the crime surrounding her is a constant source of amusement and intrigue for the viewer. In the pilot, when she hears noises outside of the house, she instinctively grabs a shotgun from its hiding place in the living room, only to find that she’s aiming the gun at Meadow, who, in a ploy typical of family sitcoms, is sneaking out of her bedroom window. In what is perhaps the most noteworthy integration of middle class parenting values and mafia convention, Carmela, hoping for Meadow to get into Georgetown, goes to her neighbor, whose sister is an alumnus, to ask for a letter of recommendation on Meadow’s behalf. Following the sister’s refusal, Carmela shows up at her office with a pie, warning, “I don’t think you understand... I want you to write that letter.” When the woman asks if Carmela is threatening her, Carmela simply replies, “‘Threat? What threat? I brought you a ricotta pie!’”

Scenes such as this playfully mock the values of the program’s imagined audience by consciously layering actions they will immediately recognize (trying everything you can to get your child into a good college) with facets of mob life that seem foreign and exaggerated. This integration allows for the normal workings of viewers’ lives to acquire a suggestion of the ridiculous, compelling them to consider that their behaviors are perhaps no less absurd than Carmela’s.

While Carmela can effortlessly take full advantage of her family’s mob background, her somewhat trapped role of homemaker, and her duties as an upper middle class parent in this particular scenario, she encounters greater difficulties in reconciling the inconsistencies of her marriage. Within the world of The Sopranos, marriage often seems to be a game of balancing costs and benefits. For Tony, the

benefits of his family life—having Carmela to care for him and his home, seeing his children succeed—seem to consistently outweigh the costs—giving up some of his masculine freedoms, tolerating his family members’ idiosyncrasies. While Tony is certainly a better husband and father than his own father was, he still has the privilege of retaining his preferred vision of family life, which melds aspects of the traditional mob family structure with some of the modern expectations of husbands and fathers. He has a loving wife, and a series of goomars; he takes a hand in parenting and takes time to enjoy his children, but leaves the bulk of the responsibility to Carmela; he provides for his family, but maintains a hold over his finances, putting aside enough money for him to gamble and spend as he sees fit. However, this doesn’t mean that Tony is content. Characters on _The Sopranos_ are rarely, if ever, fulfilled and Tony is no exception, dealing with panic attacks, his own violent nature, and a lingering feeling of emptiness. In an episode in the sixth season, after Tony recovers from being shot by his increasingly senile Uncle Junior, Tony articulates his feelings of overwhelming dissatisfaction to his therapist, Dr. Melfi. “Every day is a gift,” he explains, “It’s just . . . does it have to be a pair of socks?”

Carmela compromises her vision of family life for one in which she benefits in important ways—financial security, love, children—but she must also sacrifice a great deal in order to maintain it. Until the end of the fourth season, Carmela is forced to stay home, give up her goal of becoming a real estate agent, accept that her children will always resent her more than they do Tony, and resign herself to the notion that Tony will continue to sleep with other women. She struggles to reconcile a vision of marriage founded on intimacy and respect with the reality of her daily life.

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However, the advantages she sees as inherent in family life convince her that these costs are worthwhile. The night following Carmela’s one and only visit to Dr. Krakower, Tony finds his wife hidden under a comforter on the couch, lethargic and reserved, clearly struggling with her rejection of the doctor’s advice. She chooses this moment to get Tony to agree to make a large donation to Columbia University, where Meadow has chosen to attend, solidifying her decision to ignore Dr. Krakower’s advice in favor of the benefits of being married to Tony. Life at the Soprano house goes back to its usual cycle of disappointment, caring, frustration, and contradiction.

We see Carmela return to this depressive state in the scene at the doctor’s office in the opening of “Whitecaps.” In the season and a half since she chose to ignore the implications of her compliance with Tony’s lifestyle, Carmela busied herself with a newfound interest in her family’s finances (much to Tony’s chagrin), inspired by the same fear of being left with nothing that initially pushed her to seek out professional help, and with a schoolgirl crush on Furio, the pony-tailed Italian immigrant who also happens to be a soldier in Tony’s crew. To Carmela, Furio represents romantic love, based on intimacy and equality. Furio is quiet, polite, and willing to listen to her ideas about decorating. He’s also an even more brutal mobster than Tony himself, a fact that Carmela ignores.

When Furio suddenly returns to Italy, Carmela is forced to contemplate how utterly trapped she feels in her marriage. “Eloise,” the episode preceding “Whitecaps,” focuses on the stupefied Carmela’s prolonged reaction to Furio’s departure as she goes about her day with her family. This episode is excruciating and extraordinary in its commitment to depicting how Carmela’s disappointment saturates
every moment that she experiences. There’s an uncomfortable family dinner at Meadow’s Manhattan apartment with her roommates, at which Carmela acts deliberately obstinate, never cracking a smile, while Tony relieves the tension with his natural good humor and ability to make those around him feel at ease. This is unbearable for Carmela, but no more unbearable than her birthday tea with Meadow soon after, under the picture of Eloise at the Plaza. In the series premiere, Meadow had told Carmela that she no longer wanted to continue this birthday tradition, but she revives it in “Eloise” to reach out to her clearly depressed mother. While the tradition presumably started as a day of upper middle class girly fun, for Carmela it now represents only how the path she has paved for her daughter is one that she will never have the opportunity to take.

The two women sit across from one another in the lavish Plaza tearoom, with harp music tinkling in the background. Tension between them escalates when Meadow asks where her mother parked and Carmela responds, “There’s a lot over on 57th St. Is that okay or would you like to lecture me on parking too?” pettily recalling Meadow’s attempt the previous day to instruct her mother on the best way to get to the city, and her argument with her mother over differing interpretations of *Billy Budd* at her dinner party. Throughout this scene, Carmela appears vindictive and childish as she criticizes her daughter for leading the life that Carmela once pushed her toward. “You’re the one who wanted me to go to an Ivy League school. These are the type of people who go there,” Meadow explains, after her mother mockingly refers to her “friend, the princess.” “Would you rather I transfer to Montclair State? And then I can drop out, just like you did,” Meadow continues, coming off no less vindictive than
her mother. After a series of awkward silences, Meadow threatens to not come home anymore, to which Carmela replies, “Except that wouldn’t happen. Because you’ll need money in about a week.” Carmela takes out her frustration with her marriage on her daughter, criticizing her reliance on Tony’s funds while that same reliance is keeping Carmela at the house as well.

This type of brutal conversation is what *The Sopranos* thrives on, accompanying portraits of people who are incredibly imperfect and who belittle the people around them to make themselves feel better (although this is hardly effective). Later in the episode, Tony has one of his token fathering moments with Meadow where he urges her to go easier on Carmela. When Meadow asks why, he replies, “Change of life, maybe. Her kids are growing up . . . On some level she may feel unfulfilled. Switch on Rosie O’Donnell that’s all these women bitch about. A little of that’s probably my fault . . . Anyway. It’s an epidemic, right?” His summation of his wife’s unhappiness is comic with its reference to Rosie O’Donnell and his broad diagnosis of the state of modern women, but it’s also fairly accurate and emblematic of the way viewers can simultaneously appreciate Tony for standing up for his wife, and recognize the dark irony that Tony’s treatment of Carmela is causing her situation. He is neither fully her savior, nor her captor, as the program refuses such easy definitions of the familial situation of the Sopranos.

The episode closes with a conversation between Tony and Carmela that highlights Tony’s well-intentioned cluelessness and Carmela’s jealousy by evoking the rhetoric of fulfillment through parenting and the power of choice. The camera closes in claustrophobically on Carmela’s face as Tony lies behind her with his hand
on her shoulder, reassuring her, “[Meadow] can do whatever she wants. She’s becoming a wonderful woman, Carm. Smart, beautiful, independent woman that you created. Isn’t that what you dreamed about?” Carm stares blankly ahead of her as the first thumping notes of Annie Lennox’s “Little Bird” begin to play. “Yes,” she replies mechanically, and as the music swells Carmela closes her eyes and the screen cuts to black and the credits roll.

*The closing scene of “Eloise”*

*The Sopranos*’ most memorable moments are those that take these everyday scenes of marriage and family and infuse them with a chronic, palpable feeling of dissatisfaction and hopelessness. The series is practically a patchwork of these small scenes, creating an overall story that’s epic in its devotion to the minor moments of life that converge to create powerful emotional resonance. “Eloise” is characterized by Carmela’s grinding disappointment, gathering in one episode what had been building for four seasons. In this episode, we see Carmela on the verge of exploding, but her tense response at the end of the hour, as she hold everything in, is a reminder
of the way that the Sopranos live their lives—through denial, delusion, and acceptance of the limitations of their lives, compromising the fantasy of a fulfilling and equal relationship for the reality of everyday needs and minor benefits.

The program so emphatically insists on the fact that these people will stay together in spite of crushing circumstances that when Tony and Carmela’s marriage suddenly implodes in “Whitecaps,” it is truly jarring. The episode is full of reminders that the split has been slowly developing since the first episode of the series, most specifically when Tony bitingly reassures Carmela, “Don’t worry. I’m going to hell when I die. Nice thing to say to a person heading into an MRI.” A shot of Meadow from a scene in an earlier season, in which she had antagonized her parents, is interjected into a scene of her crying on her bed, feeling guilty over her parents’ separation. Like the characters, we had grown accustomed to these dark family moments, and had accepted that they were simply a part of the soul-crushing sacrifice one had to make in order to maintain the good parts. In “Whitecaps,” characters and viewers alike are compelled to reconsider what had happened up to this point. The episode is practically one drawn-out argument between Tony and Carmela over every devastating detail of their long marriage, demonstrating that these people had never fully accepted any of the sacrifices they made for their family over the years.

It’s in this episode that Carmela first considers that perhaps she would be better off without Tony; that maybe the costs of her marriage are outweighing the benefits. This feeling is present in “Eloise” as well, but whereas that episode was marked by the boiling, pervasive despair of silent acceptance, “Whitecaps” presents a woman who is finally pushed over the edge, exploding in anger. If “Eloise”
represents the all-consuming sameness and monotony of the entire series up to that point, “Whitecaps” represents the first truly world-changing disruption in this family. Following Tony and Carmela’s visit to the doctor, the narrative seems to return to a monotony that’s typical of the series—Tony tries to cheer Carmela up by buying a house on the shore; Carmela rearranges the silverware when Tony doesn’t set the table to her liking; Tony becomes enraged about their Chinese food delivery missing the “motherfucking, goddamn orange peel beef”; Carmela fines A.J. $3 for swearing at the dinner table.

Carmela is still sorting out her depression over Furio leaving, but viewers are reminded early in the episode that Tony and Carmela’s marriage is not founded solely on mutual misery. After showing up as a family at their new shore house, the couple shares a romantic walk on the beach. “Anthony Soprano, you are full of surprises,” Carmela tells Tony as they stop to kiss and look out at the water. “It’s good to see you with a smile on your face,” he replies.

Just when it seems that life has returned to normal for this couple, as they ignore their despair to focus on the good parts of their marriage, Carmela receives a phone call from Tony’s mentally unbalanced ex-mistress. She drunkenly informs Carmela that Tony slept with her one-legged cousin, Svetlana, leaving Carmela clutching her abdomen, the words knocking the air out of her like a punch to the stomach, forcing her to suddenly confront the reality of her marriage that was so easy to ignore when kept at a safe distance.

For Tony, the sense of life progressing as normal continues with a shot of him pulling into the driveway with music blasting, mimicking the opening credits in
which each week viewers watched Tony drive from Manhattan through industrial New Jersey to the driveway of his suburban home. But this time, when he turns into the driveway he hits something, signaling that even though this action feels so familiar, this particular return home is somehow going to be different. What he hit was his golf clubs, which Carmela had thrown out the window, along with many of his other belongings. Thus begins the brutal, detailed dissolution of their marriage.

Tony and Carmela fight in “Whitecaps”

The program doesn’t shy away from the physical or moral ugliness of the characters in this moment. The marital fighting more closely resembles a turf war, lasting for days and moving from the bedroom, to the kitchen, to the pool area, to the home cinema. Carmela’s mascara-streaked face and anguished screams are matched by Tony’s angry heaving and squinting eyes, as they engage in a constant game of
being pulled toward each other in moments of violence, and apart from one another when simply seeing the other’s face is too painful to bear.

They hurl insults at each other like weapons, intercut with threats of actual physical violence, and it’s difficult to discern whether the words or the physical brutality cut deeper. At first Tony refuses to leave the house even after Carmela confronts him about his goomars and asks him to leave. One scene opens with Carmela looking up from the kitchen sink to a window where she is startled to see Tony’s reflection behind hers, as if to Carmela, the whole situation seems to be out of a horror movie. Tony goes to the refrigerator, the site of so many normal everyday interactions throughout the series, and tries to open it, but Carmela rushes over to slam it shut, refusing him even the slightest bit of ownership of the house. When Carmela asks him to leave again, he apologizes without conviction, assuring her “it won’t happen again.” Carmela responds by telling him again to leave and when he won’t, she turns and walks away from him, only to be grabbed by Tony and held down against the kitchen counter as he rebels against her attempts to assert herself through brute force. He only releases her upon hearing her shout, “I don’t love you anymore! I don’t want you! You are not sleeping in my bed, Tony. The thought of it now makes me sick.” Though Tony releases her physically, he refuses to give in to her demands, stomping right back to the fridge as Carmela runs out of the room crying.

Their verbal warfare centers largely on the clash between what each expected their marriage to be like, and on every single disappointment they have encountered over the years. When Tony obstinately spends the afternoon on a raft in their pool,
Carmela wearily tells him, “I might actually have gone on with your cheating and your bullshit if your attitude around here had been the least bit loving, cooperative, interested.” She accuses Tony of buying her things so that he can “keep on with [his] other life,” the beach house being “just a bigger version of an emerald ring.” The talk of money and exchange continues when Tony snidely mocks Carmela, “Oh no, I forced all this shit on you. What you really craved was a little Hyundai and a simple gold heart on a chain.” He refers to their marriage as a “deal,” asking Carmela, “Who the fuck did you think I was when you married me?” This “deal” was presumably one in which Carmela would get any material thing she desired, and in exchange would allow Tony to do as he pleases. According to Tony, since she knew this going into it, where does she “get off acting all surprised and miffed when there are women on the side?” Money, goods, and exchange infuse almost every accusation they make, each spouse cheapening the other’s investment in their marriage into a desire for material benefits alone.

In contrast to this language that transforms the marital relationship into something businesslike and commodified, Tony and Carmela each describe their own idealized vision of love. Speaking of Furio, Carmela admits, “I felt like my heart would come out of my chest. He would smile. And we’d talk. And then you would come down the stairs. And I felt probably like someone who was terminally ill and somehow managed to forget it for a minute.” Following Carmela’s confession, Tony comes the closest he ever comes on the show to hitting his wife, running across the room and punching the wall next to her her instead. “Oh, he talked to you. Poor you,”
he says, echoing his toxic mother’s words as Carmela walks out the door, causing her to turn around and scream, “He made me feel like I mattered!”

Tony then explains to Carmela her reasons for sleeping with Svetlana, his mistress’s cousin: “Yeah, she’s sexy enough, even with the one pin gone, but that’s not it. I could converse with her because she had something to say.” An absolutely livid Carmela, grabbing her chest, shouts, “I am here. I have things to say!” Tony goes on to describe Svetlana, “She’s a grown fucking woman who’s been on her own and she’s been kicked around and she’s had to fight and struggle.” “Unlike me, is that it? Who the fuck wanted it like this?” Carmela asks, referring to Tony’s refusal to let her work, or have much of a life at all outside of their marriage.

Carmela romanticizes what her dream life with Furio might have been like, in a marriage based on intimacy, respect and caring. Tony describes his feelings for an independent woman who could engage in real conversation about issues beyond the everyday banality of married life. This is what they claim they want in a relationship, what they’re not getting out of their own, but the reality is that these relationships would never have worked out in the way they want them to, and these characters know that. Tony would undoubtedly have killed Furio if he and Carmela had entered into a real relationship, and perhaps even more importantly, Furio, as different as he seems to Carmela, is a part of the same system of violence as Tony. For Tony, Svetlana never even wanted him in the first place, and it’s clear that the characteristics that attract Tony to her are not at all conducive to the expectations Tony has of his wife.
Most importantly, the people about whom Tony and Carmela fantasize don’t share their level of wealth or social standing. This is not to agree with their accusations and affirm that each spouse truly wanted nothing more than money and status out of their marriage. Alternatively, in the world of *The Sopranos*, intimacy, love, and caring are inextricable from business and money. The scene earlier in the episode, when Tony and Carmela celebrate purchasing Whitecaps with a romantic walk on the beach, is an explicit reminder of this. It’s clear that Carmela cheers up because Tony buys the house for her as a gift. However, this does not mean that their marriage thrives on economic exchange alone. Their kiss on the beach is a genuine moment of love, and it is also made possible through consumption. The world of business and the world of love and caring are inseparable.

Nevertheless, when Tony and Carmela hurl accusations at one another in “Whitecaps” they do so in an attempt to convince themselves and each other that they had no ulterior economic motives in their marriage other than love. “You don’t know me at all,” Tony responds when Carmela condemns Tony of bribing her with things so she would ignore his indiscretions. “You really don’t hear me, do you? You think for me it’s all about things!” Carmela exclaims incredulously when Tony implies that she married him for money. In these moments, each character prefers to retain his or her own vision of intimate marriage free from self-interest, holding on to unrealistic ideas about love instead of accepting the compromised version that they currently live. When Tony finally moves out of the house at the end of the episode, he does so because he realizes that by staying he’s hurting his children, but his issues with Carmela remain unresolved.
The final scene of “Whitecaps” surprisingly moves away from the Sopranos and their painful separation to focus instead on the Sapinslys, the upper middle class couple from whom Tony bought the beach house. Due to the separation, Tony wanted to back out of the sale and he wanted his deposit back, but Alan Sapinsly refused. The episode’s final scenes show Alan and his wife on lawn chairs overlooking the ocean, while the music of Dean Martin blasts from speakers on a boat just feet away from their porch. The camera constantly switches between this miserable couple, the husband stubbornly refusing to give in to Tony despite the noise warfare, and Tony’s boat, parked in this spot because of his own failed marriage. It’s a picture of one unhappy marriage confronting the world of another. The true resonance of the scene, however, lies in the way the Sapinslys become representative of the professional class audience that the program imagines for itself. They’re wealthy, pretentious, social climbers who are truly unhappy despite financial success. They sit side-by-side in lawn chairs looking out at Tony’s boat, as viewers might look at a TV screen from their family room couch. Unable to stand the thunderous music any longer, Alan’s wife runs inside, leaving him sitting on the porch alone. Eventually Alan follows his wife’s lead, entering his house and closing the doors and windows to try to shut out the racket that is filling his home with unbearable tension.

We, like the Sapinslys, may consider the Sopranos to be below us at first, but *The Sopranos* is unrelenting in its devotion to forcing every viewer to consider that they may be just as miserable as Tony and Carmela. We may not murder to provide for our families or cheat on our wives with our mother’s one-legged Russian caretaker or threaten a woman with a ricotta pie—but in many ways our family lives
are just as petty and morally bankrupt as the Sopranos’. The season ends with a shot of Tony’s boat after Alan has gone inside, indicating that although the Sapinslys can close their windows and shut their doors, the noise of a failed marriage will continue to permeate into their own unhappy home.
Dana Polan astutely describes the narrative world of *The Sopranos* as “a world of unchanged people stuck in a place and time where sameness is substituted for difference and where progress gives way to repetition.” At the end of the fourth season, when Carmela finally tells Tony to leave after so many years of unrelenting unhappiness, it seems as if Polan’s assessment doesn’t quite fit. However, considering the series as a whole, the Soprano family truly is a paragon of sameness and repetition. Tony and Carmela’s separation, depicted in the show’s fifth season, is a distorted version of their marriage—they retain their economic ties but reject the love that sometimes characterized their marital relationship. Both spouses are miserable. Carmela struggles with A.J., who is growing older and more spiteful, and she has a brief affair with A.J.’s guidance counselor, which ends when he harshly accuses her of using sex to coerce him into helping A.J. with his college search. Tony is living in his mother’s old house—in itself, a sign of misery—and finds it difficult not to be at home, with his family.

In “Whitecaps,” Tony and Carmela accuse each other of using their marriage solely for the material benefits it provides, refusing to acknowledge their own self-
interest and their partner’s love. Their separation is a bleak vision of what a relationship based solely on economic ties would be like. At the end of the fifth season, Tony and Carmela make a deal to facilitate their reconciliation. Tony agrees to pay for Carmela to build a house to be turned over the hot realty market (her “spec house”); Carmela lets Tony move back in after he promises, “my mid-life crisis problems will no longer intrude on you anymore.”

Whereas Carmela once seemed horrified when Tony referred to their marriage as a “deal,” she now explicitly makes a financial arrangement to reinstate their marriage. Both spouses readily accept that their marriage can be founded on self-interest and on love. Tony and Carmela seal the new conditions of their marriage with a kiss, Tony moves back in, and soon their family life returns to normal.

Throughout the series, business and family are framed as parallel institutions. They are both worlds where you must try to convince yourself that your relationships are based on trust and love. The men in Tony’s crew hug and kiss on the cheek at every meeting, sealing each deal with a moment of physical intimacy. When they sit around the table at Satriale’s, the scene is nearly one of traditional family bliss. But both family and business turn out to involve endless cycles of betrayal, frustration, suspicion, and disappointment. Polan’s assessment of the static nature of the narrative on The Sopranos resonates equally with the stories about family and with those about the mob Family. Both refuse the idea of growth, and similar situations play out over and over again.

Still, it’s the difference between the narrative world of family and that of the mob that is most crucial to understanding how the series functions as a whole.

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4 “Long Term Parking,” Season 5 Episode 12.
Throughout the six seasons of *The Sopranos*, the pattern of repetition in the mob stories highlights the fact that when a character betrays the Family, they must be killed. From Sal “Big Pussy” Bonpensiero in the second season, to Tony's cousin Tony B. in the fifth season, to Christopher Moltisanti in the sixth season, the same story plays repeatedly. When betrayal enters the home, however, family members lash out and bicker and sulk and occasionally even stand up for themselves, as Carmela does in “Whitecaps.” But ultimately, they learn to live with the frustration—families stay together.

In Tony’s crew, people are replaceable and when one man proves to be unreliable, another man is waiting to take his place. In Tony’s family, people are far from disposable. Throughout the series Tony often refers to Christopher, one of his associates, as his nephew even though they are not related by blood. He overtly refers to Christopher as a son and begins to prime him to become his first-hand man, explaining to Dr. Melfi that the only way for a boss to stay out of jail or avoid being killed is to “rely only on family”; “you trust only blood.”\(^5\) But, in fact, Christopher is not Tony’s blood relation. More importantly, he is an unreliable drug addict. Near the end of the series, Christopher relapses and gets into a car crash with Tony in his passenger seat. When an injured Christopher urges Tony to help him get away because he’d never pass a drug test, Tony murders his injured “nephew” with no remorse.\(^6\) In the following episode, in one of the most excruciating scenes of the series, Tony comes home to find A.J. on the verge of drowning in the pool after a

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\(^5\) “For All Debts Public and Private,” Season 4 Episode 1.  
\(^6\) “Kennedy and Heidi,” Season 6 Part II Episode 6. Tony focuses obsessively on the fact that a baby seat was ruined in the crash, justifying his decision to murder Christopher by noting that the young mobster was not safe to be around his own child. This is *The Sopranos* after all, where being a bad father is as morally questionable as committing murder.
botched suicide attempt. Tony immediately jumps into the frigid water and hoists his son out of the water, taking A.J.’s head into his lap, stroking his hair, and murmuring an uncharacteristically reassuring chorus of “You’re all right, baby. You’re all right.”  

As characters, A.J. and Christopher mirror one another—Tony’s work son and his real son. These episodes similarly reflect each other. Tony, in a position of power, comes upon each troubled young man on the brink of death. He kills one, and saves the other. Christopher is replaceable; A.J. is not. 

As head of the North Jersey Family, Tony can’t ignore when a man becomes too self-interested because the stakes are too high. Tony’s life is put in danger every time someone betrays the Family, whether they are coerced into becoming a rat or they simply become too self-interested. The Soprano family, however, can survive only through accepting the self-interest of its members. Although family life includes some undeniable sacrifice and crushing disappointment, it can also provide some decent and enjoyable moments. The deal Tony and Carmela strike when they get back together is symbolic of their acceptance of their own self-interest, and of the self-interest of their partner. Their marriage is far from ideal—it’s often unequal, unfair, and unhappy—but by ignoring or accepting the limitations of their family life, they are able to salvage the mutually beneficial parts of their relationship. The deal Tony and Carmela strike is far from honorable. Each unashamedly leverages his or her own interest as they work out their agreement—but it seems to be their only viable option. 

When they sit down to discuss getting back together, Tony and Carmela let go of their idealized dreams of family, choosing instead to live within the limits of an imperfect institution. Over the course of the series, certain characters clutch tirelessly

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to a romanticized vision of love and often dream of starting over away from the world of the mob and economic interests. Put quite simply, these characters die. Adriana La Cerva dreams of a day when she and Christopher will run away together to start a family and a new life. After confessing to Christopher that she’s been giving information to the FBI, Adriana is murdered in the woods, shot in the back of the head by her fiancé’s associate. Eugene Pontecorvo, one of Tony’s men, wants to buy a house in Florida with his wife and kids and leave the mafia behind, but Tony refuses. Gene’s wife becomes angry, they both worry about their son’s drug problem, and the FBI wants Gene to step up as a primary informant. Gene hangs himself in his basement. Vito Spatafore escapes to New Hampshire and settles down with a fireman after the crew finds out he’s gay. Suffocated by this tedious existence, Vito tries to return to the mob, only to be brutally murdered in a motel room. For those that idealize family, believing that it can be started anew in a more perfect form, that it can thrive away from the economic dealings of the mob, the outcome is incredibly bleak. And considering Uncle Junior’s trajectory from mob boss to incarcerated, weak, old man with no memory of his family or job, avoiding family altogether appears no better.

In the final scene of *The Sopranos*, Tony, Carmela, and A.J. settle into a booth at a diner. They eat onion rings, listen to Journey, and discuss their day while they wait for Meadow to arrive. A.J. has just come out of a debilitating depression, giving up his short-lived obsession with the state of the Middle East to drive around in a

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8 “Long Term Parking,” Season 5 Episode 12.
9 “Members Only,” Season 6 Episode 1.
11 “Made in America,” Season 6 Part II Episode 9.
BMW and text on his BlackBerry. Meadow has given up her dreams of becoming a pediatrician and the idealism of her college years, and seems poised to follow her newest boyfriend, an underling in Tony’s crew, into a high-powered career in law defending men like her father. Carmela has long since abandoned fantasies of pony-tailed Italian men and, with significant help from Tony, has realized a handsome profit on her spec house.

By this point, Tony has lost almost all of his key criminal associates, who are dead by Tony’s own hand or have been killed in power struggles within and between mob families. He has cycled through a half a dozen goomars, none of whom lasted longer than a year or two. His mother is dead. His uncle doesn’t recognize him. But his immediate family is together, just as they were at the end of the first season, when they took refuge at their favorite restaurant during a storm and Tony urged them to “remember the little moments, like this, that were good.”¹² In the series finale, A.J. refers back to this moment, asking his father, “Isn’t that what you said one time? Try to remember the times that were good?” In a moment of typical Sopranos irony, Tony replies, “I did?” When A.J. assures him that yes, he did, Tony goes on to say nonchalantly, “Well it’s true, I guess,” casually undermining the weighty significance of the scene from the first season. By the end of the series, each of these characters has grown accustomed to accepting and ignoring the limitations of their lives in order to focus on the things “that were good.” They systematically block out the violence and exploitation that makes their life possible and screen from view the soul-crushing nature of everyday life. These characters are far from noble and nowhere near honorable, and the brief familial intimacy that once may have seemed a moment of

true joy now appears compromised and doubtful. But only through recognizing the limitations of their own lives and giving up unrealistic fantasies are they able to stay together as a family.

Following the infamous cut to black at the end of the series, we can assume the characters of The Sopranos are endlessly living their lives as they always have. These four people will continue to drive each other insane; they will disappoint each other; none will ever truly be fulfilled. But Tony, Carmela, Meadow, and A.J. will always have one another, their family, to share an order of onion rings with. The program leaves us uncertain about whether that’s something to be grateful for or not.

**Marriage, On the Rocks**

“I know people say life goes on, and it does, and no one tells you that’s not a good thing. Why is that?”

- *Betty Draper*

*Mad Men* plays with the conventions of 1950s corporate fiction as *The Sopranos* plays with mob movies. With its story of a man who returns from war and climbs the corporate ladder, *Mad Men* clearly echoes the narrative of Sloan Wilson’s 1955 novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. The novel follows a man who “voluntarily limits his ambitions and trades career advancement for the emotional fulfillment of a rich family life,” solidifying the 1950s “pattern defin[ing] success as the product of a partial retreat from the world of work into a familial world of leisure.”

Christopher Lasch similarly frames family as the ideal space for emotional satisfaction, albeit one that is not able to achieve this status, in his 1977 work *Haven*

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in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged. According to Lasch, “family life [has] become so painful, marriage so fragile, relations between parents and children so full of hostility” because of “the perversion of the most intimate relationships by the calculating, manipulative spirit that has long been ascendant in business life.”

The domestic ideology to which Wilson and Lasch both refer is founded on the assumption that home and work are entirely different worlds based on distinct forms of human interaction. Family inherently provides mutual love, intimacy, and emotional satisfaction; work is characterized by self-interest, stress, greed, and competition. The Sopranos draws on this ideology, demonstrating how family uniquely provides a level of satisfaction that work does not. However, the series only upholds this ideology ironically, revealing how you can only gain this emotional fulfillment (and a watered down version at that) when you accept that family and marriage are also institutions marked by greed and self-interest.

Mad Men returns to a time when the separation between home and work was crucial to family ideology, but instead of mimicking the narrative trajectory of The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit, the program invokes it only to subvert the ideals that the novel promotes. Over the course of three seasons, Mad Men tells a story about marriage and partnerships, creating intimate portraits of characters living in a time that contemporary viewers associate with an unequal but ideal image of family life. Characters struggle with their home lives, as they never quite reach the ideal they hope for, an ideal that some of these characters help craft through their work in advertising. One of Don’s most poignant ad pitches is for a Kodak slide projector, the

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16 Mad Men is set to continue with a fourth season in the summer of 2010, but at the time of writing this thesis only three seasons have aired.
Carousel, which he fills with images of his own family—his children on the beach, he and Betty laughing and sharing a hot dog. He ends by declaring, “It takes us to a place where we ache to go again . . . Round and a round, and back home again. To a place where we know we are loved.”17 Earlier in the episode, Don had refused to go with Betty to visit her parents, but after his pitch he returns triumphantly to join his family on their trip, kissing Sally and Bobby on the head. In the episode’s final scene, however, we are shown that this moment takes place only in Don’s imagination—he is really returning home to a dark, empty house.

Perhaps more than any other character in the program, Don holds on to a dream of perfect marriage—a dream that the show suggests grew out of a poor and emotionally cold childhood. As much as he tries to convince himself that love “was invented by men like me, to sell nylons,” he continually seeks, and usually fails, to find emotionally fulfilling, intimate relationships.18 Almost every character in the program mistakenly places their hopes for happiness in marriage and family, but Don’s refusal to compromise undermines his every attempt to achieve this satisfaction. Like Tony Soprano, he has a variety of mistresses over the course of the series, but unlike Tony who will sleep with any woman who’ll have him, Don is a serial monogamist in his extramarital relationships.

In Mad Men Don occupies a similar narrative role as Tony in The Sopranos, constantly doing things that should make us hate him, while the show simultaneously ensures that he remains attractive, vulnerable, and sympathetic, never allowing us to permanently distance ourselves from him. We certainly question our attachment to

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18 “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,” Season 1 Episode 1.
Don when, for example, he resorts to sexual violence against Bobbie Barrett, the wife of one of Don’s clients and his newest mistress. But in the next episode, Don has a heartbreaking conversation with his son Bobby where he opens up to the boy about his own violent father. Bobby says sadly, “We have to get you a new daddy,” and as Don embraces the child, we’re back to loving him.

While Don’s interactions with his children certainly provide one platform for viewer sympathy, parenting isn’t quite as central in Mad Men as it is in The Sopranos. Tony Soprano’s violence is tempered largely through his interactions with his children and the hope he shares with Carmela that, with high levels of emotional and financial investment, their children will prosper in the future. In this way, The Sopranos plays into, and with, professional class childrearing values. Mad Men, on the other hand, is primarily about partnership rather than parenting. All of its main characters are depicted entering and leaving sexual and emotional partnerships around which their happiness is shown to revolve. If The Sopranos invokes one prominent justification of marriage—that it is an institution uniquely suited to rearing happy and successful children—Mad Men largely focuses on a complementary ideology of marriage: that it provides the means for adult partners to achieve a level of emotional satisfaction that cannot be found elsewhere in life.

That ideology is dramatized most fully in the marriage of the program’s central figures—Don and Betty Draper. Don is not a good husband by any means. He’s often absent, he cheats, he refuses to share his memories and emotions with his wife. Throughout the first season he regularly calls Betty’s therapist to hear what she

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confesses each week. He leaves to pick up Sally’s birthday cake in the middle of her party, only to disappear and return hours later with a dog for Sally, but no explanation for Betty. However, Betty isn’t simply a helpless housewife suffocated by the institution of marriage. She’s petty, uptight, and vain; she’s resentful of her children, exploding to Don, “I am alone with them all day. Outnumbered,” as if her interaction with them was closer to warfare than mothering. In the second season, faced with her own deteriorating home life, Betty crafts a situation that encourages her friend Sara Beth to pursue an affair with their younger horseback riding friend, only to later spit at her friend on the phone, “No one made you sleep with him.” In this very pettiness and coldness, however, Betty escapes cliché and becomes an intriguing character. She and her husband are fundamentally mismatched, and the program implies that their unhappy marriage results not only from the inequality of the institution, but also from the fact that both partners have mistakenly placed their hopes for emotional fulfillment in their family.

The tension between the ideal imagined family and the real but imperfect family is one that haunts practically every character in Mad Men. Set at an advertising agency, the program insists on the emptiness and falseness of popular imagery, particularly in relation to family and marriage. Don creates these false images professionally, with great success. But more importantly, his entire existence is shown to be one flawless fabrication. One of the major stories told in Mad Men is that of Don’s mysterious past, which is gradually revealed to viewers over the course of several seasons, although it remains a secret to other characters, even to Betty until

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21 “Marriage of Figaro,” Season 1 Episode 3.
23 “The Mountain King,” Season 2 Episode 12.
the end of season three. Through flashbacks, the program recreates Don’s past, exploring how he was actually born Dick Whitman, son of a prostitute who died in childbirth, and how he was raised by a poor and angry farmer and his wife. Dick reinvents himself as Donald Draper, taking the tags of the man who died beside him in Korea and ensuring that he can leave the war and leave the unhappiness of his childhood behind.\textsuperscript{24}

In one flashback we see a starry-eyed optimistic Don, so unlike the jaded man we’ve come to know, talking about his excitement over meeting the woman he’s going to marry—Betty Hofstad.\textsuperscript{25} It’s Don’s marriage to Betty that completes his transition from Dick to Don, as he leaves the real Don’s widow, to whom he’d grown close, to start a new life with a woman who knows nothing of his past. His marriage is thus cast as an attempt to fully escape from a past of parental coldness and cruelty in the creation of an entirely new family. This point becomes even more explicit in Don’s present-day story. When his abandoned half brother finds Don and attempts to reestablish their connection, Don rejects him, offering him $5,000 to leave New York and giving an explanation that he would come to repeat often during the series: “I have a life. And it only goes in one direction—forward.”\textsuperscript{26} Episodes later, just before his sales pitch for the Carousel, Don discovers that Adam has committed suicide. The misleadingly happy photographs of his marriage that he projects to evoke an romanticized sense of home serve as a crushing reminder of the real family that he has sacrificed to maintain these images.

\textsuperscript{24} “Nixon vs. Kennedy,” Season 1 Episode 12.
\textsuperscript{25} “The Mountain King,” Season 2 Episode 12.
\textsuperscript{26} “5G,” Season 1 Episode 5.
Don’s decision to keep his background a secret from his new family is indicative of his misplaced belief in marriage as the ideal space for emotional fulfillment. The type of relationship he dreams of is one based on true intimacy and love, but in keeping his past a secret from Betty, Don ensures that his marriage will never achieve this level of closeness and understanding. Because he can’t achieve intimacy within his marriage, for fear that the truth would destroy the institution by revealing it to be built on a lie, Don finds married life banal and dissatisfying. This dissatisfaction leads him to affairs with strong, independent women who couldn’t be more different than his wife. From Rachel Menken, the strong-willed businesswoman, to Midge Daniels, the bohemian free spirit, to Suzanne Farrell, the modern schoolteacher, each of Don’s extramarital relationships indicates his search for what’s missing in his marriage—equality and understanding.27

While each of these relationships is romantically fulfilling, they must end because of Don’s devotion to his marriage, proving him to be an ideal, but unreliable lover. His marital dissatisfaction, resulting largely from his denial of the past, leads him to seek out fulfilling extramarital affairs, which only further weaken his marriage. But his continued devotion to this marriage also ensures that these affairs won’t last. Don’s life is a cycle of broken personal relationships that, by nature, are dissatisfying. He stubbornly chases the dream of enduring romantic happiness, sabotaging every slightly imperfect chance for satisfaction that he encounters.

27 Don’s affair with Bobbie Barrett in season two may look like an exception to this pattern, as it emphasizes power, lust, and manipulation. But the program implies that this relationship is best understood as a dismal, weakened version of Don’s intimate relationship with his equal Rachel—a fact that Don is well aware of. In an episode where he is particularly disgusted by his loveless tryst with Bobbie, he uses Rachel’s new husband’s name as a pseudonym at an underground gambling club.
Confronted with the terrible cycle of loneliness and depression that is Don’s life, we can only wonder why he does so much to preserve his marriage in the first place. Don, perceptive as always, eventually asks this question too. When Roger Sterling, a partner at Sterling Cooper, discovers in the second season that Betty has kicked Don out of the couple’s suburban home, he advises Don to apologize to his wife for whatever he’s done.28 He continues, “I know marriage isn’t a natural state, but you do it,” Roger explains, weakly adding, when Don asks why, “I don’t know. Kids . . .” That unconvincing description of the appeal of marriage is typical of the program’s portrayal of family life. As an idea, family seems to be an indispensable institution; as it’s lived by individuals, it seems terrible. The point is underscored by the experience of the program’s supporting characters. No-nonsense office manager Joan Holloway marries the man who rapes her, only to have him lose his job and join the army. Art director Salvatore Romano marries Kitty in an attempt to deny his homosexuality, which she excruciatingly begins to discover in the third season. Roger divorces his wife of many years to marry Jane, the new young secretary at Sterling Cooper, only to realize that she behaves like a petulant child. None of these characters would be able to explain any more clearly than Roger himself what it is about marriage that makes it worth preserving.

In sum, Mad Men both invokes and undermines a prominent defense of marriage. But the program is perhaps most subtle in the way that it links this treatment of marriage to a similarly ambivalent portrayal of the world of work. For, as the traditional domestic ideology described by Lasch would suggest, Mad Men

portrays the professional workplace as a realm of endless competition, duplicity, and manipulation. But it also frequently suggests that professional labor enables a kind of vibrant fraternity that makes up for the emptiness of married life. These entwined themes come to their fullest expression in the concluding episodes of season three, where the unhappiness and inequality of marriage is implicitly contrasted to the promise of professional life.

In the first half of “Shut the Door. Have a Seat,” the finale of Mad Men’s third season, the business world is portrayed in a way that seems consistent with traditional ideology. Don meets with Conrad Hilton, the influential businessman from humble beginnings whom Don met earlier in the season when they bonded over their shared lower class background. But at this particular meeting, after Don has been working for Connie for some time, Connie reminds him that despite their closeness, they’re not family. He informs Don that McCann Erickson—a larger and more modern agency—is buying Putnam, Powell and Lowe—the British firm that bought Sterling Cooper a season earlier. He informs Don that he can no longer remain his client. “It’s business,” he insists. Don, crestfallen, replies bitterly “You wanted to play with me. Kick me around, knock me down to size. That’s why you called me son. I get it now, Connie. It’s business.”

Lane Pryce, the PPL employee sent to Sterling Cooper at the beginning of the third season to oversee the merger of the two firms, has a similar interaction with his British bosses. Upon learning that McCann is in fact not buying just Sterling Cooper, as Lane originally though, but all of PPL, Lane asks dejectedly over the phone, “Well where’s my place in this?” He learns that after the transition his job is not guaranteed,

29 “My Old Kentucky Home,” Season 3 Episode 3.
which comes as quite a blow, since he has only recently transplanted his life and family to a new country. PPL’s only consolation is that they’ll “put in a good word” for him at McCann. The theme is emphasized again when Don and Bert Cooper, the aging partner who gave his name to the firm, inform Roger of the newest merger. Roger, always ready with a quip, replies incredulously to the news of Sterling Cooper’s unceremonious transfer from PPL to McCann. “Christ,” he remarks, “From one John’s bed to the next.”

Together, these three juxtaposed scenes reinforce a vision of work life that is disappointing and unfair. These men feel betrayed and powerless, made to squirm by distant authorities who hold their professional fate in their hands. Characters and viewers alike had grown accustomed to the inner-workings of Sterling Cooper over the first two seasons of *Mad Men*. While things were certainly not ideal, each character had a routine and a role to fulfill. Entering the office every day (or every week, for viewers) and knowing that you had to take off your shoes before entering Bert’s office, or recognizing the lettering on Don’s door, evoked a comfortable familiarity. This feeling was first disrupted by PPL’s entry into the workplace, bringing new employees and a different way of doing business to Sterling Cooper. Just when they have adapted to these new demands, the program’s main male characters find out that the process is about to repeat itself. The future of their business lives seems increasingly unsatisfying as they learn that their security can always be snatched away by some distant power concerned only with money and growth.

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30 “Out of Town,” Season 3 Episode 1.
But in fact, even within the comfortable confines of Sterling Cooper, business has often appeared to be governed by inequality and coercion. Even Don, who is perhaps most frustrated by his powerlessness, attempts to assert his authority over those below him on the corporate ladder. Sterling Cooper is a particularly retrograde firm, grasping at tradition and masculine privilege in a modernizing field. The layout of the office alone confirms this quality, with each male employee in a private office, where they can drink Old-Fashioneds and entertain women, while the female secretaries sit at rows of desks in the large open center of the office. Don emerges as a reluctant champion of women in the office (as much of a champion as you get in the series) in the first season when he promotes Peggy, his secretary, to copywriter. In the second season Don and Peggy each help the other at their most desperate, which builds the trust and respect they have for one another. During the third season, however, Don is consistently disparaging toward Peggy. When she asks for a raise, Don replies, “Every time I turn around, you’ve got a hand in my pocket. There’s not one thing that you’ve done here that I couldn’t live without.”

While the world of Sterling Cooper is beginning to unravel at the end of season three, “Shut the Door. Have a Seat.” also marks the dissolution of another relationship central to Mad Men. When Don comes home in this episode, he’s greeted by Betty who tells him matter-of-factly, “I made an appointment with a divorce attorney and I suggest you do the same.” Just two episodes prior it seemed as if the Drapers finally had a chance at a somewhat happy marriage. After years of secrets, Betty finds Don’s hidden stash of keepsakes and suddenly confronts him about his

31 “Seven Twenty Three,” Season 3 Episode 7.
past. Don opens up about his youth and while Betty is understandably hurt and confused, she is also surprisingly compassionate, particularly when Don explains the story of his brother, admitting for the first time, “I turned him away. He didn’t even want help, he just wanted to be a part of my life. And I couldn’t risk all this. He hung himself.” In this moment Don displays his first moment of true emotional intimacy with Betty, hanging his head as tears begin to fall, his fabricated life crumbling around him. If but for a moment, it seems as if this confession could be Don’s chance for a renewed relationship with his wife. She reaches out and gently touches his neck, saying “I’m sorry. I am,” in a moment of remarkable tenderness. Most significantly, at the end of the episode when Don returns home from work and proposes that he take the children trick-or-treating by himself, offering Betty a chance to separate herself from him, Betty declines and the family heads out together.

At this point it seems as if Betty and Don have survived the menace that has been haunting their marriage through the entire series. Soon after, however, a tragedy outside of their marriage reminds Betty that although her relationship with Don has changed, it’s not the relationship that she wanted. Falling between Betty’s acceptance of Don at the end of “The Gypsy and the Hobo” and Betty telling Don to meet with a divorce attorney in “Shut the Door. Have a Seat.” is an episode depicting the characters’ reactions to the Kennedy assassination. Aptly and ironically titled “The Grown Ups,” this episode emphasizes how consistently Don treats Betty like a child. When Sally and Bobby sit nervously watching the news, Don turns the off the TV and reassures them, “Everything’s going to be okay. We have a new president. And we’re all going to be sad for a little bit.” When Betty angrily tells Don, “I want to scream at

you. For ruining all of this,” referring vaguely to everything Don has done wrong, from his lies to his infidelities to his absence. Don replies, “You’re very upset, I understand. I know it’s painful, but it’s going to pass.” And when Betty declares that she no longer loves him he says condescendingly, “Bets, don’t . . . You’ll feel better tomorrow.” In the midst of this tragedy, Don refuses to carry on a meaningful adult conversation with his wife, treating her instead as he treats his children—as someone not rational or mature enough to handle difficult emotions. The inequality and emotional distance of their marital relationship is what compels Betty to actively pursue a divorce.

When Don and Betty interact in “The Grown Ups,” they are usually sitting or standing at different levels, hardly ever touching. When Don acts condescendingly toward Betty, he is shot standing above her. When Betty asserts her independence and tells Don she’s going for a drive alone, their positions are reversed.

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Pete and Trudy, on the other hand, who spend the day of the assassination sitting and talking together on their couch, are always shown side-by-side holding one another.

Betty isn’t only ending her marriage—she’s also starting a new one with Henry Francis, a man she met earlier in the season, who proposes in “The Grown Ups.” When Don finds this out, he violently grabs Betty out of bed, clutching her arm and sneering, “You’ve got everything you’ve ever wanted. Everything. And you loved it . . . You’re a whore, you know that?” Don’s accusation is cruel and demeaning, reducing his wife’s love to something based entirely on money. Equally importantly, it directly links the dissolution of the marriage to the dissolution of the workplace. In effect, Don accuses his wife of jumping “from one John’s bed to the next,” echoing Roger’s frustrations about the business world. In Mad Men, family life can be just as manipulative and greedy as business. By juxtaposing these two comments, the program highlights the similar problems that shadow both professional and marital relationships—at their worst, each looks like prostitution.

But, while Mad Men does very little to redeem marriage from the implication that it amounts to a basely self-interested and emotionally sterile transaction, it suggests that professional work can be an alternative. As his marriage falls apart,

Don, along with Roger, Bert, and Lane are setting into motion their plan to start their own business, free from the manipulation and demands of others. They aim to form a new firm and the only way they can accomplish this is if Lane fires each of them before the merger with McCann takes place. He has to sever their contracts, Don explains, bringing to mind the language used when Betty urges Don to consent to their divorce. In this scenario, however, all the players benefit. Having fired his one-time employees, Lane, who has valuable managerial skills they lack, is invited to join them as a partner in the new firm. All but explicitly, then, the program’s narrative implies a transition from relations of inequality and employment to those of mutual partnership. That the men vote to go forward with this plan underscores the point. It suggests the formation of a new workplace, one based on valuing employees as equals. “Everyone approached has to be of complete certainty,” Lane advises, aware that trust is a key component of their risky plan.

And indeed, their decision is followed by the easy dissolution of many of the petty, manipulative fights that characterized their work environment. Don and Roger, estranged throughout the season due to Don disapproval of Roger’s marriage, resolve their issues when Don approaches him to join the new firm. Don also approaches Pete Campbell, with whom he has never gotten along, and compliments the younger man without hesitation: “We need you to keep us looking forward. I do, anyway.” Lane finally considers himself to be a respected member of a company after a year of acting as intermediary between two businesses that never fully accepted him. These men transition from a business based on coercion to one based on happy cohesion.
This transformation is a delight to watch, as Don, Roger, Bert, and Lane round up their best employees and embark on a hopeful journey toward a new professional life.

This transition is highlighted most evocatively in the transformation of Don’s behavior toward Peggy. When Don first approaches her to join the new firm, she rightly notes, “You just assume I’ll do whatever you say. Just follow you, like some nervous poodle.” Her comment is the culmination of a theme that has built over the course of the program’s third season, as Peggy has frequently noted that Don does not treat her fairly. The man with whom she thought she shared a connection has begun treating her like a worthless employee. But this conversation, early in the season’s closing episode, only appears to be the final break-up of Don and Peggy’s deteriorating relationship and instead turns out to be the preface for a surprising reconciliation. Don shows up at Peggy’s door immediately after a tearful goodbye with his children—the final step in terminating his marriage. Having recognized that his actions toward Peggy have been cruel and unfair, Don goes to her to apologize. “I’ve taken you for granted,” he admits, “but only because I think I see you as an extension of myself. And you’re not.” His emotionally intense, sincere actions toward his one-time employee Peggy emerge as an alternative to his manipulative actions toward his wife Betty.

For, in the last few episodes of the third season, Don has appeared to treat Peggy and Betty quite similarly, refusing to give them credit for what they do for him, assuming they’ll always be there to care for him. But when Don arrives at Peggy’s apartment, these storylines diverge. Don continually tells Betty that everything will be okay without truly engaging emotionally with her; with Peggy,
Don is able to admit that in the Kennedy assassination “something terrible” happened, and the way people “saw themselves is gone. And nobody understands that. But you do. And that’s very valuable.” Even more importantly, Don marks Peggy as his equal, the only person who understands what he’s feeling. “I’m moving on,” he continues, “and I don’t know if I can do it alone.” As Peggy begins to cry and Don’s eyes brim with tears, Peggy asks, “What if I say no? You’ll never speak to me again.” Don immediately denies this, declaring, “I will spend the rest of my life trying to hire you.”

Don’s moving conversation with Peggy in this scene echoes the language of a marriage proposal, emphasizing the parallels between the two relationships. The things that Don could never say to Betty, the apologies he could never make and the intimacy they could never achieve, he is able to realize in the professional world.

In the world of Mad Men, in short, work and family are explicitly framed as similar kinds of association. Both realms can create relationships that are self-serving and manipulative, and both can produce loving intimacy. Unlike the ideology identified by Lasch in Haven in a Heartless World, Mad Men’s narrative suggests that neither work nor home is consistently heartless nor a true haven. But the program’s deviation from traditional ideology becomes even more complete in the last moments of the third season.

While Don and the other employees of the newly formed Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce move from one ugly state of business affairs into a happier one, Betty Draper makes a similar attempt with her divorce from Don and planned marriage to
Henry. But where the program casts the forging of new business partnerships as overwhelmingly hopeful, Betty’s new marriage appears to be nothing more than a reflection of her previous one. Instead of discovering a newfound independence, Betty transfers her financial dependence from one man to the next. At a meeting with a divorce lawyer, Henry declares, “I’ll take care of you. I don’t want you owing him anything.” And with that, Betty ties herself economically to another man, one that she hardly knows. This in itself wouldn’t be quite so bleak if Henry did not so closely resemble Betty’s existing husband. Henry echoes Don’s words to Betty after the assassination, reassuring her, “It’ll be okay. We’ve lost a lot of presidents and we’re still standing.” When all she appears to want is someone who will speak openly and honestly with her about the event, as Don finds in Peggy, Henry simply tells her to get lost in thoughts of Singin’ in the Rain.

The show draws our attention to the similarities between Don and Henry in a shot of the two men at Roger’s daughter’s wedding, which takes place the day after the assassination, before Don learns of Betty and Henry’s relationship. Betty comes out of the bathroom to see the two men standing almost next to one another, smiling gently in her direction.

37 Ibid.
She stops for a moment and stares at them, as if she’s choosing which one to approach. And even though at that moment she could only choose to follow Don, Betty does seem to feel that she has a real choice in the matter, and in theory she will eventually make that choice. However, the image of the two men standing in the same position, holding coats in the same way, smiling the same half-smile, underlines only their overwhelming sameness.

In one sense, Betty is going “from one John’s bed to the next.” Partly because she has no money to support herself or her kids, she jumps from one marriage limited by inequality and emotional distance to what seems likely to be another in the same mold. Betty begins to stand up for herself against Don, but the institution of marriage doesn’t provide Betty with the money or power to be able to seek out a life that would truly make her happy. Her limitations are underscored, moreover, by contrast to the opportunity that opens to Don and his allies when they form their new firm. The program underscores the dignity and humility with which Don seeks out Peggy, the former underling who has become his near equal. Having rejected the life and ideology of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, he appears poised to enter his first genuinely mutual and honest relationship. Betty, however, finds herself in the same predicament that she’s been in throughout the entire series. *Mad Men* firmly establishes work and family as parallel institutions. However, in an episode that centers on the dissolution of old partnerships and the creation of new ones, the

38 The point is underscored by the parallel narrative devoted to Don’s companion figure Roger Sterling. Just as it does for Don, the formation of the new firm provides Roger with an outlet for his emotional needs when he decides to hire Joan, his former lover and confidant, as the new office manager. Accepting his limited marital life, he now has a professional space where he and Joan can pursue a friendly relationship, further indicating the existence of a morally justifiable emotional satisfaction outside of marriage and family.
program insists that, at least at this particular moment in the narrative, work seems to
be much more promising than marriage. When characters push themselves and pursue
what they want, the workplace is able to change and progress, while marriage stays
depressingly static.

In the first episode of the third season, Don declares, “I keep going to a lot of
places and ending up where I've already been.”\(^\text{39}\) By the end of the season, it’s Betty’s
life that more aptly fits that description. The last few shots of “Shut the Door. Have
Seat.” juxtapose the newly formed Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce and the new
marriage of Betty and Henry Francis.

\(^{39}\) “Out of Town,” Season 3 Episode 1.
Don hangs up the phone after a final short conversation with Betty, leaving his former family behind and walking into the sun-drenched hotel room that the firm is using temporarily as an office. With a smile on his face Don looks out at the group of familiar men and women talking, joking and eating. “Hello Don,” Lane says, welcoming him into this new world of business characterized by egalitarian relationships and family-like gatherings. Betty, with baby Gene in her lap, sits somberly next to Henry on the plane to Reno to get divorced so that she can remarry. The cabin is dark and the new couple is separated by empty space as Henry sleeps and Betty stares straight ahead, lost in her own thoughts, before slowly and silently closing her eyes.

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Mad Men’s portrayal of Betty Draper has received an intriguingly varied response from viewers. Feminist blogger Amanda Marcotte notes how the program, by “asking us to spend time on the feelings and thoughts and fantasies of Betty Draper,” whom some viewers find boring, is underlining how in this type of family ideology “the whole point of wives is that they’re in the background, making it possible for the real actors—mostly men—to make things happen.” Some conservatives, including Benjamin Schwarz, criticize the character, and the actress who plays her, arguing that she’s an unrealistic character played by an incompetent actress. However, “the conservative reaction to the Draper marriage shows exactly how effective that storyline is making its point,” Marcotte explains.

The Betty Draper debate is representative of the ways in which the issues depicted in Mad Men were relevant to the cultural environment of the viewers’ contemporary world. Our feelings about the characters are inextricable from our opinions about family, marriage, and gender roles in our own lives. Mad Men and The Sopranos present characters who struggle with exaggerated versions of our own problems. Whether viewers realize it or not, the programs don’t simply depict “alien worlds” that are so wholly different from our own as to be unrecognizable. If this were so, their portrayal of family life wouldn’t cause nearly so much discussion or controversy.

If the only goal of The Sopranos or Mad Men was to allow us to escape into a foreign world, the shows would become representative of the type of narrative that they avowedly deplore, the type of narrative that offers viewers a distraction that

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feeds the delusion of their lives. *The Sopranos* focuses on characters who delude themselves into believing that they’re making necessary and noble bargains for the sake of their family; who believe that these compromises are honorable and ultimately meaningful. These are people who constantly escape into stories, like Tony’s love of the History Channel, which becomes a space where he can live out his masculine fantasies that contrast with the reality of his home life. *Mad Men* depicts people who are living the crushing delusions of postwar family ideology, which were promoted largely through television and advertising, as we see in the giant ads which the cartoon businessman falls past in the program’s opening credits.

On one level, the programs do serve as an escape for viewers into a new and different world. But *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* never fully stray from the tensions that viewers care about most—most of which revolve around the struggles and contradictions of familial and marital life. The main characters of each of these programs have chosen, whether by free choice or by necessity, to compromise and scale back their expectations for what marriage can be, in order to continue living the life to which they’ve become accustomed. Instead of deluding viewers and assuaging viewers’ own insecurities about the compromises they have made to preserve their own family life, the programs emphasize the grinding disappointment that this inherently unequal and corrupt bargain breeds over days, months, and years. While the characters may have their moments of contentment and levity, the shows insist that giving up so much for family may not be such a valuable or honorable choice.

Dana Polan notes the tendency of *The Sopranos* to break narrative cohesion and to tell meandering stories, which he believes “has something to do with a time
(our historical present) in which it’s easy to feel cynical about the idea or ideal of a higher authority that would legitimate our actions, that would grant us moral purpose." With their preoccupation with marriages that never change or progress, both programs present family as an institution that fits perfectly into Polan’s analysis. They insist on the dullness and heartbreaking disappointment of living through limited marriage, instead of the honor of accepting a limited life. *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* are satisfying narratives for the professional class precisely because they ask a question that is rarely addressed in popular discourse: are the compromises we make to preserve family actually of value?

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41 Polan, 64.
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