

Mad desires

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [May 01, 2013](#) issue



SELLING THE WORLD: Madison Avenue ad executive Don Draper (played by Jon Hamm) is the central enigma of *Mad Men*. © 2013 AMC TELEVISION NETWORK. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

A voyeuristic pleasure in historical flashbacks is part of what makes *Mad Men* compelling viewing. Set in the early 1960s, AMC's Emmy-winning drama about an advertising firm shows a world very close to our own except for being more glamorous (the characters make midday drinking look sophisticated instead of desperate, and they wear linen suits to the birthday party of an eight-year-old).

And except, of course, for all the casual racism, sexism and classism. A new secretary at the firm is subjected to nonstop verbal harassment and a public pool is started to see who will be first to sleep with her; a housewife drinks and smokes her way through her pregnancy; a picnicking family shakes their litter onto the verdant grass and drives away. How sexist and ignorant and environmentally unsound, we say from the safety of our couches.

"When are things going to get back to normal?" wonders Roger Sterling (John Slattery), the jocular senior partner at Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce, the fictional advertising company. He is responding to the firm's decision to hire its first African-American secretary in 1966. Given that viewers first met Roger five seasons earlier when he was trying to find a Jewish employee and pass him off as a junior creative

agent to impress a Jewish client (“I had to go all the way to the mailroom,” Roger brags, “but I found one”), SCDP has come a long way. And we know that 1966 is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to social and cultural revolutions.

Six seasons into *Mad Men*, I find myself watching the show not to revel in historical difference but to scour it for signs of how revolutionary change happens. What internal and external forces have to align for social change as profound as the civil rights and women’s movements to take root? What transpires to turn Peggy Olson (Elisabeth Moss), the maligned secretary, into a sought-after creative force in her own right? Can we find clues in the *Mad Men* universe to finish these revolutions in our own time or to start others?

Season six, which premiered in April, brings the show that much closer to the cultural watershed of 1968. Roger will have an answer to his question: there is no going back to “normal” as he knows it. But that doesn’t mean the revolution is complete.

Whatever useable insights the show might offer come in its portrayal not of big historical movements but of the inner lives of its finely drawn characters, whose desire, fantasy, imagination and nostalgia combine to aid in the birth of a new world—or to prevent it. This is true of no character as much as Don Draper (Jon Hamm), the central protagonist, a man who has reinvented himself many times.

As a young man in the Korean War, Draper steals the identity of his dead commander. When his first wife discovers his subterfuge and their marriage implodes, he reinvents himself as a single man oscillating between drunken blackouts and self-expression journaling, only to end up trying his hand at modern marriage with a career-minded younger wife. Draper is the enigma at the center of the show: what fundamentally motivates him is always shifting just out of view. As we watch him spiral between elation at new social possibilities and despair at a hard-to-name malaise that permeates the shifting world he occupies, he offers us the key to his own interpretation: you have to be able to imagine the new world before you can desire it and you have to desire it before you can live in it.

As the chief creative executive in an advertising firm, Draper is in the business of tapping into human desire. Or as he says in season four: he doesn’t just want to give people what they want, he wants to cultivate new desire. Of course, he is talking about selling face cream. But what he is really selling, if you take him at his word, is

desire itself and the ability to imagine oneself in the world one wants to inhabit.

The show grasps something that Christians have known for a long time: if you cannot change the heart, external change will take you only so far. We must desire God's kingdom in order to inhabit it, and we must imagine it in the stories our tradition tells if we are to desire it. Unlike Draper's advertising visions, however, which are about constant reinvention focused on a yet-to-come future, Christian desire is formed in a strange paradox that holds the past and the future together. We never simply reinvent ourselves but are offered old stories that remake us in new ways.

Part of our challenge today is imagining a world that counters the one that the Don Drapers helped create. There is nothing new or exciting about realizing how deeply the forces of consumer capitalism shape our desires. But watching these characters try to find the stories that help them live in this brave new world may give us insight into how to tell our own stories more compellingly and to advance a revolution that doesn't need an ad campaign to verify its truth.