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Mad Men on the Couch: A Psychiatrist Analyzes Don and Roger

• By Gwynne Watkins



Don Draper has reinvented himself time and again — yet every time he sheds his skin, the same old Don eventually emerges. In the final scene of the season-six premiere, we saw him hopping into bed with another woman, confirming that his fidelity to Megan was as short-lived as those bottles of Scotch in his office. Nothing, it seems, will ever satisfy this man: not his hard-earned success, not his "It" girl wife, not even an all-expenses-paid vacation to Hawaii. *Can* Don ever be at peace with himself? We called up Paul Puri, a UCLA-affiliated psychiatrist and avid *Mad Men* viewer who briefly [analyzed Draper for Vulture last fall](#), and asked him for his professional opinion on Don's wandering eye, fear of death, and potential for change.

We want to know whether Don can ever be satisfied. What's making him so restless?

I'd call it an existential dilemma. He's a guy who's always been a climber; he started out at a very low point. With a lot of people who really work their way up from nothing, they reach a point where they've attained a high level of status, and they say, "Okay, now what?" They don't have a "next thing." And when they're left with having to look at themselves, there's an incredible emptiness there because they've never looked inward. Don has always been trying to understand *other* people, but never had to deal with his own issues about death, which were further stirred up by the PFC he met in Hawaii — getting the kid's lighter, and the identity aspect of that.

Yet death has always been a part of Don's life. His mother died having him, his father died violently in front of him, he inadvertently caused the death of his brother, and he bears some responsibility for Lane's death. This is something that's been a constant theme, right? How does that affect a person's emotional health?

Yes, the death issue has been there since he was a kid, and he's compartmentalized it very well.

He locked it away for much of his life and just dealt with what was happening in the present, and he's dealt with it fairly well. But it seems like he's never faced his own mortality before.

How does it affect people in general if they lose a parent before they ever know them?

It's going to vary on the person, but a kid could learn from that situation that they can't rely on anybody, because people die and they disappear. And so they could become fiercely independent and learn that they have to do everything for themselves. They might go one of two ways: They might find a parental figure in somebody else, or they might become parentified themselves in taking care of other people, which is very much what Don steps up to do. In the cultural context, he becomes the Man. And there could definitely be a component of that in his crisis, in that Megan doesn't need him anymore. She doesn't need him to be successful; she doesn't need him for anything. And now what's his purpose? So he goes to someone who does need him.

Does that explain his inability to be faithful? If it's because he always needs someone to need him, that would certainly hold up with Megan, but I don't think it applies to every woman he's cheated with.

Maybe not. I think there's two parts to it for him, the other one being the pursuit. He needs something to be chasing; he needs something to be going after, kind of like his going after Dow at the end of last season. The other side being, he needs someone who wants or needs him, so that he can serve as maybe a little bit of an authority figure or a guide or a leader. And you can tie this back to another thing, which is that Peggy's gone, too.

That's a good point.

So he doesn't have a role of somebody to lead within the company right now either. Ginsberg and the rest of the staff are flying a little bit solo, compared to how it was before. When Megan was working within the company, it was very collaborative, and Don really drew from that. Then when she moved on to her own career, he had his business, she had hers, but he was still supporting her. Now she's a rising star and really doesn't need him anymore and has her own life. And so he's not needed to be the Man, necessarily, to serve in that kind of role.

Is there a kind of therapy that specifically addresses Don's type of crisis?

There's existential therapy — logo therapy is another name for it — which was brought up by Victor Frankl. He was a psychiatrist who survived the concentration camps, and back then the common wisdom of the time was that if you take away people's food and shelter and everything else, they'll devolve into animals and they'll tear each other apart to survive. And his experience was that people weren't like that; they were very generous with each other, and they gave food to each other even when they were starving. And he said that the people who really survived were the people who found purpose and meaning in their life, something to live for. And so part of his therapy is based around people trying to find meaning in their life; he wrote a little book called *Man's Search for Meaning*, which is about his experiences with this. And so for Don, and for Roger a lot, too — these are men caught in a position now where they don't have as much purpose in Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce. They aren't really necessary anymore. All the younger people are keeping the ship afloat for the most part, and Don's ideas even aren't really sticking. They're both lacking purpose. Roger's psychoanalysis is hilarious, by the way.

Tell me your reaction to the psychiatrist scenes.

I think it's kind of brilliant. Roger's not at all an introspective person, so him trying to do that is such an amazing mismatch. He doesn't actually want to talk about anything; he's trying to amuse his therapist, which is him playing the same role that he plays with everybody else, and he hasn't

shifted over yet to actually looking at himself. And when he actually tries to talk about something, like his mother, nobody can take him seriously. But then when he gets alone, you can see that he actually has sorrow over this; he just doesn't know how to portray that with other people.

What should somebody like Don do in his situation? We see him with the doctor's wife at the end of the episode, saying, "I don't want to do this anymore." Part of him knows that this is not working. How does he break the pattern?

You know, I think there's a lot of potential ways. Based on this formulation that we're talking about, it might be about him becoming a father again and finding a new role with his kids, and finding a way to fulfill himself that way. It might be about finding someone else to mentor within the company. Another thing might be him actually going into some depth about his own death and really exploring that and what it would mean for him to die and what he feels like the meaning or purpose of his life is. All of those are ways that people often go and explore from this position. Another one is rehashing the things that he's done before and trying to recapture what brought him out of this last time, which I think is part of him cheating with another woman. He's going, "Okay, well, when I've had these problems before, I just went and cheated and I never had to think about it." But it's not really giving him the same fulfillment anymore, or the same distraction.

You mentioned finding fulfillment through kids, which is interesting because Don has kids. Roger has kids. And neither of them seems to have really embraced the opportunity to find a real connection with their children. Could that be part of why they're in crisis right now?

A little bit. It's another aspect of this American model of the nuclear family: It involves a strong, independent male who can tell the family what to do, as opposed to being vulnerable with his family or connecting. Neither one of them are particularly listeners. They don't really hear what's happening with their families. They're more about talking or showing or amusing people — Roger in particular. So both of them are fairly fixed in terms of their roles within their family, and they haven't figured out how to do anything else yet. For example, Don just kind of passed the role of Sally's caretaker to Megan, and he didn't even think about it. She goes to see Don and ends up hanging out with Megan.

How do you think Don is handling his Dick Whitman past right now? We're seeing it come up with the lighter. He obviously has a lot of unresolved stuff. Is there any way to move forward from a total change in identity?

I think there's plenty of ways. The most likely thing is that he will find someone new to connect with, or he'll connect with somebody old in a new way. I mean, he did it with Peggy before, to an extent; he could be more open with her than he was with anyone else. He's at a crossroads in terms of his role, just as people go through stages in their life. If you go to [Piaget or Erikson](#), there can be a crisis of identity as people have to let go of one role, or one identity, to be able to embrace a new one. Don is stuck in the idea of being a productive adult, as opposed to the idea of mentoring other people, which is a common thing when people reach a certain age — to mentor youth and be like a father figure to other people. And he hasn't quite stepped into that. He still wants to be the hot stud.

This is the third time we've seen a *Mad Men* character in therapy.

Each one has been a very different representation. Psychoanalysis was the way of the times for the most part; there's a big breakout in different forms of therapy during the sixties, with the



AWGA - News Update

human potential movement and that kind of stuff. But yeah, the first one, Betty's therapist, was kind of dull and empty and never spoke, and she felt awkward, and he talked to her husband without letting her know. And then Sally's child therapist was, I thought, great. And then Roger's is just humorous, such a mismatch, but the therapist calls him on how much of a mismatch it is. His frustration is evident.

Of all the characters who have yet to see a therapist, who would you put on the proverbial couch? Who would benefit the most from therapy?

You mean besides Don? Pete Campbell would be interesting: He has this constant inferiority; he has this duplicitous thing with his wife and this need to undercut everybody else — there's a level of self-hatred and a real violence built into all of that that would probably be very worthwhile to explore in analysis. I think he would benefit the most, compared to everybody else.

Pete does like talking about himself.

He would fight interpretations, probably, though. Because he sees himself as the hero, not the villain.