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The American Television Hero as a Novelist of Himself: Language as *Tópos* in Matthew Weiner's *Mad Men*

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ABSTRACT
This article tackles the manifestations of American literary themes in Matthew Weiner's *Mad Men*. I contend that the transmedial alignment of TV series and literature heightens our understanding of fundamental myths of American exceptionalism. This paper studies the role of language at script level as a site or *tópos* where the protagonist's constant reinvention occurs. Moreover, it provides an interdiscursive analysis of Frank O'Hara's "Mayakovsky" and John Cheever's "The Swimmer" to show their thematic connection, which is the transition from old to new life. This theme possesses an axiomatic role in the genesis of this show, suggesting a tight intermedial relationship between the show's scripts and the two literary works I will analyze. On the basis of my analysis, I suggest that reading this TV series as literature is possible if we consider both the show's thematic connection with American literary themes and its multiple literary references.

KEYWORDS: *Mad Men*; Transmediality; American TV series; TV series as literature; Literary Transduction; American Exceptionalism; The Great American Novel.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article addresses the new American imaginations that have crystallized in what is considered by some scholars as quality television representative of a new golden age of the medium (Hubbard, 2020, p. 415; McCabe & Akass, 2008, 2017; Mittell, 2015; Shimpach,

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2017, pp. 722–727; Shuster, 2017, pp. 1–2; Somacarrera, 2019; Wilkins, 2020). A multi-layered concept involving technological developments, market-driven strategies and aesthetic aspects, quality TV series have proliferated in the last two decades (McCabe & Akass, 2008; Lotz, 2018; Mittell, 2015). In the field of aesthetics, the multifarious nature of quality television includes "the formal complexities of extensive narratives […], increasing number of characters […] and other formal aspects associated with quality, such as intertextual relations […] style or mise-en-scene" (Abellán et al., 2021, p. 151). Thus, this reshaped American television is usually understood to encompass TV series produced in the last two decades, including Matthew Weiner's *Mad Men* as a seminal example of this more recent form of quality television. Throughout its nine-year run, the show has offered an imaginary of the historical period of the 1960s in the US (Booker & Batchelor, 2016, p. xiii; Shimpach, 2017, pp. 722–723). According to Shawn Shimpach, part of this series' popular success and critical acclaim owes a great deal to scrupulous attention to historical accuracy (2017, p. 723), which has also been a recent tendency in Anglo-American television more generally (2017, p. 722). Admittedly, the historicism of *Mad Men* relies on a representation of reality which both presents "the surface details right" (Polan, 2013, p. 42) and is firmly anchored in a verisimilar portrayal of the cultural history of the decade of the 1960s (Booker & Batchelor, 2016; Shimpach, 2017, p. 724). As a result of this, the viewer is certainly left with "the impression that somehow the series is serving as a documentation of the times" (Polan, 2013, p. 42). It may be assumed, then, that the concern with descriptive detail is necessary to establish a referential relationship between *Mad Men* and the historical period it depicts. In "The Reality Effect", Roland Barthes points out that the profound attention to insignificant details in realist novels produced what he called "concrete reality", that is, "a pure and simple representation of the 'real', the naked account of 'what is' (or has been)" (1986, p. 146). Needless to say, the naked account of the real which is rendered through these novels is always mediated and ultimately unavailable: a literary mirage.

The emergence of photography in the mid-nineteenth century and the fruitful link which it forged with realist literature have been brilliantly explored and analyzed by Astrid Böger (2015, p. 173). According to her, the alignment between both media "can augment that [Barthes's] 'reality effect', by adding two modes of representation with their specific versions of 'concrete reality' into one coherent, intermedial artifact" (Böger, 2015, p. 175). Historically, realist literature and photography have competed with each other, both claiming to provide the most truthful and accurate rendition of life. Böger has analyzed the way in which photography and literature merged into one intermedial format in a series of documentary books published in America during the years of the Great Depression to elucidate how that interaction was negotiated. Documentary works like Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) or James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) seemed to respond to a necessity many Americans felt, that of learning about the

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hardships experienced by many people during the Great Depression (Böger, 2015, p. 176). In the words of cultural historian Alfred Kazin, "never before did a nation seem so hungry for news of itself" (1982, p. 486). This golden age of the documentary book both established itself as the most veracious genre of the American Depression-era and as the format which most satisfied Americans' hunger for an authentic documentation of that epoch. In the same way as this intermedial format that proliferated between 1937 and 1941 maximized Barthes's reality effect by combining realist literature and photography, it could also be argued that the transmedial association of literature and television has proved to be a very productive one (De Biasio, 2017; Huertas-Martín & Winckler, 2022). According to Jason Mittell, this association resulted from a series of aesthetic novelties in TV series, which he described as a rise in narrative complexity (2015). In this respect, I agree with Huertas-Martín and Winckler's thesis that considering TV series as literature heightens our understanding of one of the major forms of storytelling in the twenty-first century (2022, p. 1; Carrión, 2022, pp. 275–276). According to this perspective, rather than treating literature and TV series as opposites, I endorse Sarah Cardwell's proposal of viewing these two elements as having a synergistic relationship (2002). In fact, it could be claimed that this transmedial and synergistic artifact may function as a unitary and coherent work of art "comparable […] to (great) novels" (Shuster, 2017, p. 2).

In what follows, I examine the transmedial alignment between American TV series and literature, taking Matthew Weiner's *Mad Men* as a case study. Given the show's care for historical detail, I suggest that this TV series somewhat mirrors the American longing for "news of itself", which is showcased in the documentary books referred to above. Nonetheless, those books are a record of their epoch, whereas *Mad Men* is a retrospective TV series set in a bygone era, and, as such, it could be classified as "retro but contemporary at the same time" (Schneider, 2007, as cited in Shimpach, 2017) in its attempt at rewriting the present by rewriting the past (Booker & Batchelor, 2016, p. 125; Shimpach, 2017, p. 737). Additionally, the fact that this show's attention to a concrete historical reality co-exists with the manifestation of American literary themes and references to specific works in the very fabric of its plot further provides a profound understanding of foundational myths of American exceptionalism (Shimpach, 2017, p. 732). In this sense, it should be noted that both those literary themes (redolent of the tradition of the great American novel) and the literary intertextuality present in *Mad Men* are marks of this show's seminal status as a quality TV drama. Hence, I contend that deeming this TV series (and reading it as) literature is worthwhile, as this approach provides an enhanced insight into American cultural history and imagination. Needless to say, this heightened understanding is reinforced and maximized by the vast web of literary allusions underpinning *Mad Men*, which, as Lee & Metz point out, "give spectators extra information about the intellectual roots of each idea, and how they are related to larger contexts" (2022, pp. 287–288). Thus, in this article I intend to shed light on how some literary texts circulate and are incorporated into this TV series' audiovisual

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fabric through the lens of what Lubomír Doležel calls literary transduction (1986, pp. 28–29).

Reading *Mad Men* as a (great) American novel raises the question of how some American literary themes resonate with this TV series. Issues like the American Dream, the notion of reinvention (embodied by Don Draper, the show's chief character), or the myth of the frontier are inscribed in the warp and weft of this work of art, supported by the many references to literary works that form part of the subtext of the show, two of which I analyze below, that is, Frank O'Hara's poem "Mayakovsky" from *Meditations in an Emergency* (1957), and Robert Cheever's short story "The Swimmer" (1964). In this article, I focus on the notions of the American Dream and the American Dread, as formulated by British literary critic Tony Tanner in *City of Words*: *A Study in American Fiction in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (1970). In the words of Tanner, "there is an abiding dream in American literature that an unpatterned, unconditioned life is possible [and] there is also an abiding American dread that someone else is patterning your life […] to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action" (1970, p. 15). According to him, the concurrence of these literary themes is an overarching feature of American fiction in the historical period covered in his book (Tanner, 1950–1970). The work of authors like Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, William Burroughs, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., or Thomas Pynchon reflects an ambiguous relationship of the self to social, psychological and linguistic patterning (Tanner, 1970, p. 15). Of these forms of conditioning, I am particularly interested in linguistic patterning and the paradoxical relationship that both the hero and the author maintain with it. For these writers and their works' heroes, words and the fictions that stem from them may operate as the vehicle of an unconditioned and unpatterned existence but can also be a repressive force that imprison us. *Mad Men*'s chief character Don Draper falls within this rubric of heroes, as he is portrayed as a novelist of his own history who ironically finds himself trapped in the unconditioned and unlimited life his fictions have delineated. It is in the interstices of this in-between space or blind spot that both literary and televisual heroes struggle to dwell, a fruitful tension accurately summed up in William Blake's famous poem, *Jerusalem*: "I must Create a System. or be enslav'd by another Mans" [*sic*] (1991, p. 144). However, one should not forget that this system (i.e., fictional realm) which liberates us from another *Man's* is itself made of words and may limit as well as liberate us. As Tanner points out, "That which *de*fines you at the same time *con*fines you" (1970, p. 17). Heroes might feel impelled to find, then, a *tópos* where their abiding dreams and dreads can be somehow reconciled. I contend that in Matthew Weiner's *Mad Men* that *tópos* is language, the site where Dick Whitman/Don Draper resides and where his own reinvention takes place. Thus, language drives the liberating potential of reinvention that Dick Whitman/Don Draper pursues, as I examine in the next section.

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2. "NEW DAY, NEW IDEAS, A NEW YOU": DICK WHITMAN/DON DRAPER AS AN EPITOME OF THE REINVENTION OF THE SELF THROUGH LANGUAGE

According to Shawn Shimpach, *Mad Men* offers a very particular theory of history, which culturally and thematically resonates with a reality TV show known as the makeover program (2017, pp. 726–727). A chief genre of television during *Mad Men*'s debut in 2007, the makeover program can be defined as "a reality show […] in which new characters are introduced each episode and, through the genre's signature 'reveal' sequences, transformed (invariably for the better) by the end" (Shimpach, 2017, p. 727). Shimpach contends that *Mad Men* follows the basic logic of the makeover program on an institutional, thematic, and cultural level (2017, p. 727). On a thematic level, Don Draper's struggles for identity shape the narrative drive of this series and trace a link with the notion of the reinvention of the self as one of the foundational myths of American culture. This makeover logic that seems to inform this series' theory of history and ideology (Shimpach, 2017, p. 727) also applies to the institutional transformation of AMC, the channel on which *Mad Men* was broadcast (Dill-Shackleford et al., 2015, p. 3). In the words of AMC's vice president of programming, the reinvention of this premium cable service derived partly from a concern for "bring[ing] a level of cinematic quality to the TV screen and bring[ing] our own take to some of the genres" (Schneider, 2007, as cited in Shimpach, 2017). To label *Mad Men* as "retro but contemporary at the same time" (as AMC told *Daily Variety*) (Schneider, 2007, as cited in Shimpach, 2017) reveals much of the outlook that seemed to inspire the writing of the series' narrative, which is that of "rewrit[ing] the now (by rewriting the past)" (Shimpach, 2017, p. 737). Thus, the cultural and historical documentation of the times that the show depicts may be read as an active form of rewriting or making over an era through the lens of a twenty-first-century premium cable serialized drama (Booker & Batchelor, 2016, p. 125; Shimpach, 2017, p. 725).

The discursive role of the notion of the reinvention of the self articulates this series' narrative, presenting *Mad Men's* central character Don Draper as the very emblem of the makeover I have referred to above. Creative director of a fictional 1960s Madison Avenue advertising firm, the show's enigmatic protagonist was born as Dick Whitman, the son of a Pennsylvania sex worker. It is during the Korean War that Whitman assumes the identity of his commanding officer Donald Draper –killed in action– by seizing the latter's dog tags. As William Siska notes: "With this act […] Don Draper becomes a quintessentially American figure, shedding his past to reinvent himself" (2011, p. 200). The promise of reinvention, of a life of unlimited possibilities, has marked the national character of the US and is closely connected with the myth of the American Frontier (Shimpach, 2017, p. 733). According to Slotkin, America's frontier "was the border between a world of possibilities and one of actualities, a world theoretically unlimited and one defined by its limitations" (1985, p. 45), that is, the American Dream vs. the American Dread. The line that divides Don's life before

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and after crossing that border is the site where the negotiation of his identity takes place. It is in here where the transition from old to new life occurs, where Don's American Dream and American Dread must be reconciled. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the verb "don" means "to put on", and likewise "drape" means to "adorn or wrap loosely with folds of cloth" (Soanes & Stevenson, 2008); it is, then, by assuming another man's identity that Draper sets foot in "a dream world in which infantile omnipotence became a possibility for the grown man" (Slotkin, 1985, p. 45). However, this grand promise of sheer freedom and hope is always threatened by a nightmarish anxiety, which drives the central character's aimless progress.

Language channels the liberating potential of reinvention that Dick Whitman pursues. As an advertising genius, Draper's tool of choice is words: it is words that make his American Dream feasible. The ambiguous tension between the American Dream and the American Dread and its link with language can be traced back to some of the foundational novels of American literature, in which language tends to draw attention to itself, and in which words are both referential and part of the fictional construct (Tanner, 1970, p. 20). We are told to call *Moby Dick*'s narrator Ishmael, and this command reminds us that there may be an arbitrary frontier between reality and the words we use to refer to it. Had Matthew Weiner's *Mad Men* been published as a novel, it could have very well started with a Melvillian opening: "Call me Don Draper". On the other hand, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the letter "A" makes us aware of the fact that the first letter in the alphabet has robbed Hester Prynne of her real identity. At the same time, in describing Prynne's grey dress as an item of clothing which made "her fade personally out of sight and outline", we are also reminded that "the scarlet letter brought her back from this twilight indistinctness, and revealed her under the moral aspect of its own illumination" (Hawthorne, 2003, p. 197), which suggests again an ambiguous and problematical relationship with language (Tanner, 1970, p. 24). What we can infer from these two examples is that the words and letters we use to refer to a fictional character do not undermine his or her identity but rather constitute it.

Accordingly, the reinvention of the self is accomplished through language in Don Draper's case. Not only does he rewrite his own history, but he also creates witty ad campaigns which quite often have an autobiographical imprint and are revelatory of his true self. In the episode "Public Relations" (Season 4, Episode 1), Don is asked to provide a description of himself, and his response is: "My work speaks for me". These words anticipate the final revelation of the *Mad Men* finale. The last words spoken in this TV series are uttered by a guru during a dawn meditation session at a hippie retreat in California and announce the protagonist's ultimate reinvention: "The new day brings new hope. Lives we've led. The lives we've yet to lead. New day, new ideas, a new you" (Season 7, Episode 14). The last transformation which Don undergoes is followed by "the catastrophe of [his]

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

personality", to use Frank O'Hara's famous verse from "Mayakovsky", a poem which plays an important discursive role in this series. By the time he arrives at the Californian Esalen-like retreat, his life has turned into a professional and relational failure. It is then that Don phones his friend and colleague Peggy Olson and makes the following confession: "I broke all my vows. I scandalized my child. I took another man's name and made nothing of it" (Season 7, Episode 14). The show's story ends with Don Draper's last reinvention, having found (again) hope for a new life by accepting all the lives he has led before (Spiro & Lawler, 2016, pp. 64–66). Immediately after the camera zooms in on Don's meditative face, the image cuts to Coca-Cola's "Hilltop" television ad from 1971 (Nielsen, 2018, p. 275; Shimpach, 2017, p. 725). As Jon Hamm commented in an interview, "[Don] wakes up in this beautiful place, and has this serene moment of understanding, and realizes who he is. And who he is, is an advertising man" (Itzkoff, 2015). Therefore, his true authentic self is that of an ad man, the *tópos* where his identity is disclosed and negotiated using words (and fiction). The reinvention or makeover that has taken Don Draper to this revealing ending does not actually subvert the protagonist's identity, since the boundary that separated life before and after Don is, now more than ever, blurred. As Shimpach comments: "The after must always have already been there, before, in one form or another" (2017, p. 735). Hence, the border that divides life before and after Don is the site where the transition from old to new life occurs, which is the thematic core of the two literary works I will analyze in the next section.

3. READING TELEVISION SERIES AS LITERATURE: THE INTERDISCURSIVE ROLE OF FRANK O'HARA'S "MAYAKOVSKY" AND JOHN CHEEVER'S "THE SWIMMER" IN *MAD MEN*

Matthew Weiner's *Mad Men* is arguably a showcase for an array of literary works, including overt references to American authors like William Faulkner, Philip Roth, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Sloan Wilson, Thomas Pynchon, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Frank O'Hara, to name but a few on a long list. Some of these authors' works are not only cited but also impact the series' narrative. Therefore, it can be argued that some of these works are part of the subtext of the TV drama (Amezcua Gómez, 2017, pp. 184–186). This is the case with two literary references, which I am now going to analyze in detail: an overt reference to the poem "Mayakovsky", published in 1957 in Frank O'Hara's *Meditations in an Emergency*, which is also the title of episode 13 of the second season; and a covert reference to John Cheever's "The Swimmer" in the "The Summer Man" (Season 4, Episode 8).

This section of the essay aims to highlight the thematic connections between O'Hara's poem and Cheever's short story through an interdiscursive analysis (Albaladejo, 1998; Albaladejo, 2008). The two literary works I am studying revolve around the same thematic core, that is, the transition from old to new life, which in turn possesses an axiomatic role in

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the genesis of Matthew Weiner's *Mad Men*. Thus, to use Julia Kristeva's terminology, the genotext crystallizes as a phenotext in this show's script, as the latter appears to sprout from a similar thematic core (1976, p. 281).

At the same time, the incorporation of two literary texts belonging to different genres into the fabric of this show's story arc involves a significant transformation of these texts, which is accomplished through a process of what Lubomír Doležel has called literary transduction (1986, pp. 28–29). According to Doležel, "transducing activities include incorporation of a literary text (or any part of it) into another text, [and] transformations from one genre into another (novel into play, screenplay, libretto, and so on)" (1990, p. 169). Thus, literary texts "enter into complex chains of transmission", and literature's perpetual circulation becomes a requisite for its survival (Doležel, 1990, pp. 167–168). O'Hara's poem and Cheever's short story undergo a transformation as they are incorporated into a show's script, which in turn mediates between the two literary works and the resulting filmic discourse. Concomitantly, these two literary allusions shape the show's narrative drive to the extent that it can even be argued that they both "provide the context for how Don makes decisions" (Lee & Metz, 2022, p. 287).

The first literary reference, to Frank O'Hara's *Meditations in an Emergency* (1957), appears in the first episode of the second season, "For those who feel young". Don has a chance encounter with a counter-cultural reader of O'Hara's poetry in a bar and asks him if what he is so intently reading is good. The man laconically responds that he doubts that he might like it. Don gets a copy of O'Hara's book and finds himself captivated by the work. The episode ends with Don's voice-over reciting the poem "Mayakovsky", while we see Don sending his copy of *Meditations in an Emergency* to an unknown recipient, inscribing on the book the following words: "Made me think of you -D" –"D" being a valid initial for both Don and Dick. In *Mad Men*'s twenty-fifth episode, "The Mountain King", the book reappears in Anna Draper's house in San Pedro in California. When Don asks his close friend if she has read the book, she says she did and replies that "It reminded me of New York, and it made me worried about you" (Season 2, Episode 12). Her answer suggests that she has grasped both the deeper meaning of O'Hara's poem and the impact it is likely to have on Don, with whose constant struggles for identity and yearning for a new life the poem resonates strongly:

> Now I am quietly waiting for
> the catastrophe of my personality
> to seem beautiful again,
> and interesting, and modern.
>
> The country is grey and
> brown and white in trees,
> snows and skies of laughter
> always diminishing, less funny

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not just darker, not just grey.

It may be the coldest day of
the year, what does he think of
that? I mean, what do I? And if I do,
perhaps I am myself again.
(O'Hara, 1967, pp. 51–52)

While Don is waiting for the catastrophe of his personality to seem beautiful again and be himself once more, the promise of new life and resurrection is laid out when Anna reads tarot cards for him. Anna notices one card that stands out significantly, which is that of the Judgement. Although Don comments that that card "can't be good", Anna soothes him and tells him that this tarot card means resurrection (Season 2, Episode 12), prefiguring the theme of the transition from old to new life, of Don's rebirth or reinvention. Subsequently, Anna interprets the meaning of another tarot card, the World, which, in her words, is in an important spot and means that Don is "a part of the world. Air, water, every living thing is connected to [him]" (Season 2, Episode 12). This nice thought is followed by Anna's decisive advice to Don: "The only thing keeping you from being happy is the belief that you are alone" (Season 2, Episode 12) –a warning which seems to counter Don's nihilist conception of the universe as he expressed it in "The Hobo Code" (White, 2010, p. 93): "There is no big lie. There is no system. The universe is indifferent" (Season 1, Episode 8).

The episode closes with Don wading into the Pacific Ocean and fulfilling the promise of resurrection. This scene can be read as symbolic self-baptism, which brings new hope to Don's life; that is, the promise of a new you. O'Hara's poetry collection, *Meditations in an Emergency*, circulates and is quoted across the second season both diegetically and non-diegetically (Lilley, 2012, p. 301), which serves as an illustration of how the "treatment of reading and books as a theme […] influence the form and productions of television series […] in the current century" (Winckler & Huertas-Martín, 2022, p. 6). The poem "Mayakovsky" thus plays an important interdiscursive role in this season, as it echoes Don's identity crisis, reflected in the use of a split subject, "what does he think of/that? I mean, what do I?", as the lyrical addressee. Whether the recipient is Dick or Don is irrelevant, if the show's central character is himself again. Whoever that self may be is something Don does not yet know and will never do, as the very question, "Who is Don Draper?", is a central and recurrent one throughout *Mad Men* (Lee & Metz, 2022, p. 277). As Lee and Metz point out, Don is "the embodiment of the novelistic: his very identity is the result of a narration of the self" (2022, p. 280). Thus, as a highly skilled novelist of himself, Don is depicted as a protean character that is very hard to read: sometimes presented as both "the hero of a nineteenth-century Bildungsroman" (De Biasio, 2017) and as an epic, tragic hero (i.e., Ulysses, Oedipus) (Lee & Metz, 2022, p. 279). Don's aimless struggle to know who he is features prominently throughout this show and it is accurately reflected in O'Hara's use of a

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

split subject. At the same time, O'Hara's "Mayakovsky" interacts thematically with the series' narrative and functions as its genotext, since the script of "The Mountain King" (but also the second season) explores the theme of transition from old to new life and the way this transformation affects Don Draper.

When we see Don plunging into the ocean and surfacing with what we suspect is a new self, the resurrection prophesied by Anna Draper seems to have been fulfilled at the end of "The Mountain King". As Scott Hubbard has pointed out, the scene is a neat illustration of the show's broader use of baptismal symbolism (2020, pp. 417–422) to indicate renewal. According to Hubbard, "*Mad Men*'s encoding of meaning in symbolic representation re-sacralizes the secular world into which those symbols were transplanted" (2020, p. 415). The symbolic representation of renewal or rebirth through a secularized version of the rite of baptism is also conveyed through the general use of water imagery, as we can observe at the end of "The Mountain King" and again in "The Summer Man" (Season 4, Episode 8), which I turn to now. It is in this episode that Don comes face to face with an upside-down version of his American Dream.

In this episode, Don is grieving the recent death of his good friend Anna, and he is still suffering the consequences of his separation from his ex-wife, Betty Draper. As a result of his having stepped out of a seemingly perfect family life, he has developed a drinking problem and is now depicted as a sort of outcast in the series. "The Summer Man" pays tribute to John Cheever's "The Swimmer" (1964), one of the most popular short stories written by the often called "Chekhov of suburbia". Cheever was a real-life dweller of Ossining, the famous bedroom community where the fictional Don used to live prior to his divorce in *Mad Men*. In "The Swimmer", the hero Neddy Merrill decides to go swimming through all the swimming pools of the neighborhood until he reaches his home by water. Before he starts his journey, he observes that "His life was not confining and the delight he took in this observation could not be explained by its suggestion of escape" (Cheever, 2010, p. 777). Cheever's protagonist describes himself as "a pilgrim, an explorer, a man with a destiny" (2010, p. 778), making his way home through a string of swimming pools, which he calls the Lucinda River to honor his wife. At the end of the story, he realizes that he is not expected by anyone: "The place was dark. Was it so late that they had all gone to bed? […] The house was locked […]. He shouted, pounded on the door, tried to force it with his shoulder, and then, looking in at the windows, saw that the place was empty" (Cheever, 2010, p. 788). The swimmer's pilgrimage had no purpose: Neddy Merrill does not arrive in Ithaca, nor is there a Penelope waiting for his return home. Likewise, it could be argued that Don Draper's personal journey "is more reminiscent of James Joyce's Leopold Bloom than Homer's Ulysses" (Lee & Metz, 2022, p. 281).

"The Summer Man" is thematically connected with Cheever's story through a series of continuous scenes that show Don Draper swimming at the New York Athletic Club. The

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motif is repeated throughout the episode, suggesting a parallel with Neddy Merrill's journey and building up to an epiphanic moment at the end of the episode. Juxtaposed with the swimming sequences, we can also watch a set of scenes in which an introspective Don Draper is keeping a journal, in which he tries to organize his thoughts because he feels that his "mind is a jumble", as the following excerpt reflects: "More and more every day about Vietnam. I hope it's not another Korea. I sound like a little girl, writing down what happened today. Sunday is Gene's birthday party. I know I can't go. I keep thinking about him. He was conceived in a moment of desperation and born into a mess. A list of things I'd like to do: One, climb Mount Kilimanjaro. Go anywhere in Africa, actually. Two, gain a modicum of control over the way I feel. I want to wake up. I don't want to be that man" (Season 4, Episode 8).

In this journal entry, we glimpse Don's mental confusion and central anxieties. We also get a description of Don's two main objectives: gaining "a modicum of control" over how he feels and waking up in order not to "be that man". Yet since we do not know who "that man" is, the words create a vague sense of a man whose identity is ill-defined. What we notice is Don's craving for a new reinvention or rebirth. The journal entry also reveals the most likely source of his angst, not being allowed to attend his little baby's birthday party. Even though he is not welcome in his own house (now occupied by Betty Draper and Henry Francis), he shows up unexpectedly at Gene's birthday party. Don is not expected in the former Draper residence, but unlike in Cheever's short story, the house into which he steps is not empty, as a part of his own family still lives there. The closing scene of this episode shows the protagonist playing with his son Gene, oblivious to his ex-wife's discontent. Meanwhile, the viewership has the impression that the show's protagonist has gained a new understanding of his new relationship with his family. This epiphanic moment is preceded by a scene where we listen to Don's voice-over reading the last entry of the journal he is writing, an entry which delineates the frontier that shows a shift from old to new life. Additionally, the journal and the words Don scribbles in it highlight the decisive role of language as the site of the protagonist's reinvention:

> When a man walks into a room, he brings his whole life with him. He has a million reasons for being anywhere. Just ask him. If you listen, he'll tell you how he got there, how he forgot where he was going and then he woke up. If you listen, he'll tell you about the time he thought he was an angel or dreamt of being perfect. And then he'll smile with wisdom, content that he'd realized the world isn't perfect. We're flawed because we want so much more. We're ruined because we get these things and wish for what we had (Season 4, Episode 8).

Both "The Mountain King" and "The Summer Man" are thematically connected as the motif of the transition from old to new life propels the narrative drive of both episodes. Don's identity crises are followed each time by a resurrection or reinvention of the self, a transformation illustrated by the water imagery which features the ocean and the pool as

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vehicles for a symbolic baptism which marks the transition to a new stage of Don's life. The interdiscursive role of O'Hara's "Mayakovsky" and Cheever's "The Swimmer" is essential to maximize our understanding of Don's multiple transformations throughout the series. Both the lyrical I of O'Hara's poem and Neddy Merrill in Cheever's short story undergo a transformation that resonates with Don's identity crises and subsequent transitions.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In this article I have analyzed the manifestation of American literary themes as they have been addressed in Matthew Weiner's *Mad Men*. TV series belonging to the newly reshaped quality television display a profound understanding of fundamental American themes such as the notion of the reinvention of the self, the myth of the American frontier, or the American Dream. In *Mad Men*, this insight is offered through a transmedial alignment of TV and literature. Thus, I agree with Huertas-Martín and Winckler's stance when they state that reading television series as literature helps elucidate "the complex interweaving of literary works and concepts with the audiovisual texts of contemporary television series" (2022, p. 8). Admittedly, this transmedial alignment challenges predominant notions of literature and provides an insight into how literary works circulate, transform, and expand, which sheds light on literature's protean nature and its tendency to trespass on new territories and dissolve into new media (Huertas-Martín & Winckler, 2022, p.7; Mora, 2012; Williams, 1977, pp. 162–163).

Concomitantly, I have examined how the notion of the reinvention of the self shapes the narrative drive of *Mad Men*, a show deeply concerned with rewriting the present by rewriting the past (Shimpach, 2017). The fictional character of Don Draper has been studied and depicted as the emblem of this reinvention, as he undergoes several transformations through the series. It may be argued that Don epitomizes to a certain extent the prototypical hero of a nineteenth-century Bildungsroman (De Biasio, 2017; Lee & Metz, 2022). Yet the show's story ends with Don Draper's last reinvention, and, unlike a classical Bildungsroman hero, he does not seem to ultimately consent to his integration into society. Instead, Don seems to embrace the narrative tradition of the American novel of initiation (De Biasio, 2017), since the perpetual initiation and reinvention of the self represents the main narrative thrust of the show's protagonist. I thus contend that the site of this reinvention is language: the *tópos* of his personal possibilities and potentialities as well as the place where he must reconcile his ambiguous relationship with the American Dream and the American Dread. Language is simultaneously the site where the negotiation of Don's identity takes place and the tool that channels the liberating potential of reinvention he pursues. Both as a novelist of himself that rewrites his own history and as an advertising genius that creates witty campaigns that are quite often revelatory of his true self, Don Draper is portrayed as a

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modern Scheherazade, who never runs out of the necessary words that keep the catastrophe of his personality at bay.

Finally, I have highlighted the thematic connection between Frank O'Hara's "Mayakovsky" and John Cheever's "The Swimmer"; two works belonging to two different genres, which play an interdiscursive role in the series and interact thematically with the show's depiction of history. Both O'Hara's poem and Cheever's short story resonate with Don's constant struggles for identity and serve as an illustration of how the intertextual system underlying *Mad Men* shapes this show's story arc and illuminates our understanding of Don's identity crises and subsequent transitions (Lee & Metz, 2022, p. 287). This interdiscursive inscription of literary works in the narrative texture of this show, through the process of what Lubomír Doležel has called literary transduction, would therefore back up the conclusion that it is possible to read a TV series such as *Mad Men* as an expanded form of literature and, just maybe, as another (great) American novel.

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