

Research in Practice (ADAD5004)

Part One: Philosophical Inquiry and Artistic Underpinnings (1,460 words)

“I keep scratching at my life, but I can’t get in”:
To what extent does *Mad Men’s* Don Draper fit into Sartre’s existentialist archetype of ‘The Waiter’?

Using the American television series *Mad Men* as an illustrative tool, this essay will explore existentialism and Sartre’s concept of Bad Faith. Using plot beats from the show, the show’s protagonist Don Draper will be analysed to assess the extent to which his inauthenticity qualifies him for fitting into Sartre’s archetype of ‘The Waiter’.

Existentialism is broad-reaching philosophical movement which seeks to grapple with a perceived “meaninglessness of life” which many people experience in an increasingly secularised and chaotic world (Aho, 2023). Widely believed to be a reaction to the horrors of the second World War, existentialism as a philosophical movement actually had its early genesis in the nineteenth century with the writings of the Danish thinker and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (Aho, 2023). Much of his work was born out of a reflection on the Danish State Church and the existential despair he felt that Christianity, which he believed should have a moral basis, was being weaponised for political and social gain (Cox, 2008). However, French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, as well as his contemporaries, are generally credited with putting existentialism on the map.

The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, in conjunction with contemporaries such as Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus, is unwittingly responsible for the disingenuous view that existentialism was born in the twentieth century. Given the context of the Second World War and the morbidity which it sparked in the collective consciousness, Sartre’s atheistic observations on the nature of existence may have been more appealing to a populace constantly bombarded with death (Aho, 2023).

Contrasting Kierkegaard’s deterministic view of our “reason” for being alive defined by the intervention of God, Sartre posited the secular maxim “existence precedes essence”. In his seminal work on the subject *Being and Nothingness* (1969), Sartre states: “Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does”. By this, Sartre is arguing that humans are not tethered to any sort of metaphysical ‘programming’, be it through God or any other spiritual phenomenon. For Sartre, human

beings' existence is defined by the choices we make over the course of our lives (Cox, 2008).

On the subject of man's condemnation to free will, Sartre's seminal text and essentially the bible of existentialism, is *Being and Nothingness* (originally published in 1943 under the title *L'Être et le Néant*) in which he chronicles his core philosophies on the subject. Encased in this work is the concept of 'Bad Faith'. For Sartre, the onus is on all individuals to carve their own path in life because he rejects the concept of divine intervention. With this in mind, when an individual attempts to shy away from taking responsibility for their actions, Sartre categorises them as living in 'Bad Faith' (Cox, 2008).

Mad Men, penned by *Sopranos* staff writer Matthew Weiner ran from 2007 to 2015 and chronicles an ensemble of people in their navigation through the social turbulence of the 1960s. At the helm of the show, and whose lives everyone seems to revolve around is the central protagonist, Don Draper. He is handsome, charismatic, wealthy and holds a top-level position as the Creative Director of a big Ad agency on Madison Avenue. However, much of Don's outward persona is merely a façade. Don, who is characterised early on as an enigmatic figure, is revealed to have an extensive and muddled back story (Seitz, 2015). He is not 'Don Draper' at all, as the audience is initially led to believe, but in fact called Dick Whitman; son of a teenage sex worker who died in labour and an alcoholic father who he watched die at the age of ten. The real Don Draper was Dick's commanding officer in the Korean war. When the original Don Draper gets killed in a freak accident, Dick seizes the opportunity to shed the skin of the life he is so desperate to escape and, making it look like he was the one who died, becomes Don Draper. As the series progresses, the show explores in many ways what consequences arise from this schism. Ultimately, a question is raised: 'is Don Draper a real person, or just an unachievable ideal?'

To bring Sartre's philosophy to the forefront of this quandary, one could certainly make the case for Don being the perfect example of someone who is living in bad faith. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre uses various archetypes to aide in his exposition of the concept, one of which being that of "The Waiter" (1943). "The Waiter", says Cox (2008), philosopher and scholar of Sartre, "...comports himself in a deliberate and calculated manner, walking in with stiffness and restraining his movements as though he were a machine." In essence, The Waiter is somebody who is incredibly appearance-oriented, always looking and acting the part, but the whole thing is simply a performance. For almost the entire series run, Don is always decked out in a perfectly-fitting suit, with not a hair out of place. This, alongside his cold and emotionally cut-off temperament and his back story as a self-made success while surrounded by nepotism and "old money" makes him arguably the perfect embodiment of this archetype.

Despite the fact that both men and women fawn over him, believing the 'lie' that he broadcasts into the world, Don frequently feels like an imposter (The Reluctant Psychoanalyst, 2017). Because he stole another man's identity, he lives in constant fear of his secret getting out, to the extent that in the Season 4 episode 'Hands & Knees' (2010), in which he fears that the FBI might be on cusp of discovering his deceit, he is plunged into a "spiral of terror" wherein he totally ditches his usual façade of coolness (Seitz, 2015). Thus, Don is, in a sense, forced to live in bad faith from a legal point of view, because he would face jail time for desertion and identity fraud if the truth ever came to light. On a purely psychological note, though, Don sees himself as living in bad faith through his, at times, crippling imposter syndrome.

Following the death of Anna Draper, the wife of the ‘real’ Don who died in Korea and who Don formed an unlikely friendship with, he becomes incredibly introspective and critical of his own identity as Don. “Somebody very important to me died... The only person who really knew me” explains Don in Season four episode ‘The Suitcase’ (2010). In the next episode, ‘The Summer Man’ (2010), Don confronts his own struggle to retain (or even possibly attain) the ability to fill the shoes of such a bold character in a “series-first” voiceover (Seitz, 2015). The significance of the voiceover is that we get a rare window into the psyche of what is necessarily a shady and enigmatic figure. Reflecting on his battle to *be* Don Draper he says “I want to have a modicum of control over how I think and feel... I want to be *that* man.” This statement is particularly significant in analysing Don’s characterisation through the guise of Sartre’s “Waiter” model because it suggests in very plain terms that Don feels like an imposter. He may have fooled everyone else, but he has not (and perhaps never will) fool himself. His imposter syndrome finally comes to a tragic head in the final episode of *Mad Men*, ‘Person to Person’ (2015).

Throughout the seventh and final season of the show, Don slowly sheds his skin. He sells his flashy New York penthouse apartment, he quits his high-level job to go on a cross-country road trip, and eventually gives away his car to a teenager. All the Draper-esque affectations which comprise his persona become stripped away until he finds himself alone on the California coast at a meditation retreat. In a phone call to his prodigy Peggy Olsen which comes across like a verbal suicide note, Draper laments that “I took a man’s name and made *nothing* of it”. This, alongside the culmination of him slowly abandoning all the things that ‘make’ Don Draper, is Dick Whitman peeking through the blinds after many years in hiding (Seitz, 2015). He is finally surrendering to the possibility that ‘Don Draper’ is merely a concept, and an unattainable one at that.

To conclude, analysing the characterisation of *Mad Men*’s Don Draper is an extremely appropriate vehicle for exploring Sartre’s existentialist Bad Faith model. Through his years of lying to the world about the very fabric of his identity, Draper spends every waking moment living inauthentically, the poisonous effect of which finally catches up with him at the series’ close. Don, condemned to free will, is totally responsible for his deceit and according to Sartre’s ideological philosophy, must take the onus upon himself to live truthfully if he ever wants to stop being The Waiter.

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Part Two: Applying Philosophical Concepts in Practice (1,216 words inc. screenplay)

Solipsism, or Subject Idealism, is a branch of existential philosophy, the basic argument of which being that the human mind cannot prove the existence of anything other than itself (Britannica, 2024). Probably the most well-known philosopher to have broached this topic, and probably also one of the first, is the French polymath Rene Descartes. In his classic text *Mediations on the First Philosophy* (1641), he coined his famous maxim “I think therefore I am”, which pertains to this notion that while you may not be able to trust your senses or surroundings, you can always trust your own consciousness.

I have always felt drawn to this philosophy and the creative avenues that it can lead to. With this in mind, I have written a short metamodern script to explore the ways in which existentialist philosophy can cause us to question things that we can spend our whole lives taking for granted.

EXT. STREET CORNER - DAY A drab, drizzly Weekday afternoon. TRUMAN (25, strange, fashionably unkempt) stands on a street corner, knees bouncing in angst and anticipation. He checks his watch. EXTREME CLOSE UPS ON: The watch-face, which a hand covers -- TRUMAN'S face as he looks down at his wrist -- The hand uncovering the watch, then re-covering it. BACK TO: EXT. STREET CORNER - CONTINUOUS Truman repeats the action two or three more times. Then, starts closing his eyes with painful-looking tightness, before opening them sporadically. Looking around him, then repeating the action. A woman's voice emerges from outside the frame: NANCY Hey, are you Truman...? Truman, lost in his own weird world doesn't register her presence. NANCY (cont'd) Umm... you okay there, man? With a sudden burst of awareness, Truman suddenly re-engages with reality. Stood before him is NANCY (25, bookish, vaguely boho). He looks her up and down in a frazzled daze. TRUMAN What's wrong? Oh. Nancy takes an unconscious step back.	2. NANCY Hi. It's Nancy? From the app? Truman, yeah? It takes a good five seconds, but eventually Truman remembers how to act like a person. He flashes her a bright smile. TRUMAN Oh God! Yes! Of course. Hello. NANCY (unconvincingly) Nice to meet you. TRUMAN (nodding enthusiastically) Yeah, yeah. And you. They just sort of stand there for a moment. Nancy, eager to escape the awkwardness: NANCY ... So where's this spot you wanted to head to? I'm starving. Truman looks vaguely around him before spotting a CAFE just over his right shoulder. TRUMAN Yeah, no, me too. It's here, I think. NANCY You said it was your favourite brunch spot in town? TRUMAN Oh, yeah, no, definitely. <i>Totally</i>. Great eggs.
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3.

INT. COOL CAFE - MOMENTS LATER

A bustling cafe, crammed with insufferable arty-types with tiny beanies and handlebar moustaches who sip oat flat whites from little glass cups to wash down their tofu scramble.

The sound of forks clinking on plates and the receipt printer whirring and milk screaming as it's steamed is almost deafening.

TRUMAN and NANCY sit across from each other in the middle of the chaos.

NANCY

So...

TRUMAN

... So.

NANCY & TRUMAN
(at same time)

What do you --

They laugh in unison.

NANCY & TRUMAN
(still at the same time)

Sorry, what do --

They both shake their heads. Weird.

NANCY

What do you do again?

He takes a swig of his BLACK COFFEE as he answers:

TRUMAN

Nothing. I'm a Philosophy student.
First year.

NANCY

Oh cool! Nice to meet a fellow mature student. I do Fine Art.

Truman nods enthusiastically but doesn't say anything.

4.

NANCY (cont'd)

Philosophy though. That's mad. Must bend your brain.

Truman has started distractedly twirling a fork around --

TRUMAN

Pah! Ohhh yes.

INT. COOL CAFE - LATER

TRUMAN and NANCY sit across from each other in the CAFE, with food now having arrived.

He's gone for the EGGS BENEDICT, she's gone for the SHAKSHOUKA.

Truman appears characteristically distracted.

NANCY
(chewing food)

So do you come here a lot then?

Truman seems to be playing "peek-a-boo" with his own plate of food while he answers:

TRUMAN

Every now and then. Good eggs.

NANCY

Yeah, I remember you saying that you...
(now sighing)

...like the eggs.

She looks down at her own plate for conversational inspiration.

NANCY (cont'd)

Have you tried shakshouka before?
I know it looks a bit weird - I used to be put off by it too - but then I went travelling - to Morocco - and I thought "no, come on, Nancy! When in Rome" - or Morocco - and all that! --

5.

Truman has abandoned his game of peek-a-boo with the Eggs Benedict and instead begun to sporadically turn around behind him, before facing forward and then repeating the action.

Nancy tries to pretend not to notice.

NANCY (cont'd)

-- And so I was really brave, and I tried it, and I loved it! And now I always order it when I -- Sorry, what the fuck are you doing?

She clicks her fingers at him --

NANCY (cont'd)

Hellooo? Earth to Truman. Are you on something, or... something?

Truman finally catches wind of her attempts to get his attention.

TRUMAN

What? Oh. Yes. Sorry, yeah. I took some shrooms earlier.

NANCY

What, actually? You took some shrooms. Before coming on a first date.

TRUMAN

Yeah. Sorry. Is that okay?

NANCY

Not really, man, no.

They sit in silence for a beat.

NANCY (cont'd)

You got any more?

CUT TO:

6.

EXT. PARK BENCH - DUSK

TRUMAN and NANCY sit side-by-side on a PARK BENCH at the top of a hill which overlooks the city. The rain has stopped, having cleansed the sky and leaving behind the beginnings of a gorgeous pastel sunset.

Now that Nancy has written-off this date as a disaster which will absolutely not be going anyway, she's leaning into the weirdness; accepting it for what it is.

NANCY

I haven't taken shrooms since I was about nineteen. How long do you reckon they'll take to...

TRUMAN

Good question. Gooooood question.

NANCY

Thanks. Does it have an answer?

TRUMAN

... Another good question.

There's a faux-tense pause before they both chuckle.

TRUMAN (cont'd)

Don't worry, you'll be fine.

Nancy can't help but be struck by Truman's (however brief) burst of normalcy.

NANCY

You seemed like you were having a bad one earlier. You good now?

TRUMAN

Oh, that wasn't the shrooms. It was fuckin'... Doctor Kemp.

NANCY

Who- what is- huh?

TRUMAN
One of my professors. Set this essay
on Solipsism. Ruined my life.

NANCY
Why?

TRUMAN
Because now I don't know if
anything's real. I know I'm real - I
think therefore I am, or whatever -
but everything else? You, this bench,
that tree. What if it all disappears
when I close my eyes? You could be
some illusion, or a robot, or an
actor just following the lines of a
script --

Did Nancy just glance at the camera for a split second?

TRUMAN (cont'd)
-- and I'd never know. That's what
gets me. No way of knowing. Ever. At
all.

He shivers as the nervous energy shifts through his body.

NANCY
Ohhh. Is that why you were playing
hide and seek with yourself in the
cafe?

It all starts making sense to her. Bless him.

TRUMAN
I've been doing these little tests.
Seeing if I can trick the system. I
know it's dumb.

Beat.

Nancy gives the quandary some thought for a moment.

NANCY
Does it matter?

TRUMAN
Does what matter?

NANCY
Well, so what if this is all fake?
Looks real. Feels real. Has never not
looked or felt real. Isn't that good
enough? A simulation so convincing
that you can never see the cracks may
as well be real, no?

She makes a good point. Simple, but sturdy.

Truman takes it in. His features soften as a calm smile
spreads across his face.

Nancy shuffles in her seat, getting comfy. She flexes her
hands.

NANCY (cont'd)
Ahh. Think they're kicking in.

On Truman, nodding his head slowly.

Then, tuning into his senses: The softly whistling wind can
be heard, so can the birds tweeting up above in their nests.

Still smiling, he closes his eyes.

Then opens them.

CUT TO BLACK.

THE END.

The script is layered with a few metamodern jokes. The protagonist's name is a nod to Jim Carrey's classic character from *The Truman Show* (dir. Peter Weir, 1998) who finds out that for his entire life, he has been the subject of a television show in which every element of his life is fictionalised. In *First Date*, my Truman expresses paranoia that his life might be a work of fiction ("You could be some illusion, or a robot, or an actor just following the lines of a script.") to which Nancy responds by giving a subtle nod to 'the camera'. I wanted to turn what could be quite a terror-inducing thought into a comedic piece to heighten the response that one might have to learning about a concept such as solipsism.

I believe that the execution is in line with what I wanted to achieve, but that I possibly went *too* meta and might want to attempt something more subtle next time around.

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Part Three: The Power of Philosophical Concepts in Filmmaking (251 words)

“Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” –

Ludwig Wittgenstein

In layman’s terms, what German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein is referring to in the above quote from his 1921 works *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is that humans are limited by the parameters of language. Some phenomena, whether metaphysical or emotional, cannot be expressed through words. Due to the limited scope of this piece, definitions and introductions will be kept brief. However, with the power of filmic storytelling, practitioners are able to take philosophical quandaries and traverse them on-screen.

To touch upon an existentialist example, *The Matrix* (dir. Lana & Lilly Wachowski, 1999) is an exploration of Cartesian Dualism, which refers to Descartes’ theory that the mind and body are separate. Using the concept of a planet earth in which every single human being is born, lives, and dies in individual pods, but whose consciousnesses mingle in a hyper-realistic simulation, the Wachowski sisters paint a vivid picture of a philosophical principle which would be otherwise incredibly hard to express.

On a more emotional note, Lars Von Trier’s *Melancholia* (2011) follows Justine (played by Kirsten Dunst) as her depression manifests into the world around her

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morphing into a biblically apocalyptic hellscape. Depression, being by nature something which is difficult to communicate in its inherent subjectivity, is brought to life by Trier through the striking visuals which he implements. The effect of placing this kind of subject matter into a cinematic narrative gives a voice to those who might deal with depression by giving them a reference point for explaining it, while also feeling seen and understood.

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