The Anxiety of Ascent
Middle-Class Narratives in Germany and America

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Summary

This thesis examines a narrative of cultural decline that developed in the wake of Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. For Weber, and a group of influential sociologists that followed, Western modernity is marked by an increasing disenchantment with the bourgeois values that had previously given a sense of structure and meaning to life. Despite its unparalleled material achievements, the modern West in this reading is suffering from a crisis of meaning and is no longer able to provide authoritative answers the only really important question: ‘What shall we do and how shall we live?’

With this question in mind, this thesis explores two influential visions of middle-class life: the German bourgeois ideal of the late nineteenth century and the American middle class in the 1950s-1960s. The case studies were chosen because they share several key social facts. Both periods were marked by unprecedented economic development, social mobility and consolidation of values and aspirations commonly associated with middle-class life. They were also remarkably fecund periods of social enquiry that shaped many of the central themes and questions of the sociological tradition.

The case studies are built on a close reading of a contemporary and retrospective text for each of the periods. In the German case, Gustav Freytag’s novel *Debt and Credit* (1855) is read against Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks* (1901). In the American example, attention shifts to television. An examination of the domestic comedy *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) is followed by a reading of the cable television drama *Mad Men* (2007-2015). Following a well-established tradition within the sociology of culture, these texts were selected for their extraordinary popularity and cultural influence. The conclusion draws the central themes in all four stories together and considers the enduring accuracy of Weber’s diagnosis.
Statement of Authorship

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma.
No other person’s work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.
The thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

SIGNED:

DATE: 2/3/2016
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1- Introduction

This thesis examines two images of middle-class life: the German bourgeois ideal of the late nineteenth century and the American middle class in the 1950s-1960s. The case studies were chosen because they share several key social facts. Both periods were marked by unprecedented economic development, social mobility and the consolidation of values and aspirations commonly associated with middle class life. They were also remarkably fecund periods of artistic and sociological enquiry. Attuned to the shifting Zeitgeist, artists and sociologists in each of the periods viewed the emergent middle class as the primary carrier of modernity. Collectively, they produced a deeply ambivalent body of works that wrestled with the gains and losses that accompanied rapid social change. In each of the periods, these works found a receptive audience in the upwardly mobile. These were times when sociological texts regularly became bestsellers while popular art, catering for its parvenu audience, explored the contours of middle-class life. Consequently, they were sites of acute cultural reflexivity that brought into focus many of the hopes, beliefs and anxieties that continue to shape modern life.

The thesis is built upon a close reading of two key texts for each of the periods. In the German case, Gustav Freytag’s novel Debt and Credit (1855) is read against Thomas Mann’s novel of bourgeois decadence Buddenbrooks (1901). In the American example, attention turns to television. An examination of the domestic comedy Father Knows Best (1954-1960) is followed by a reading of the cable television drama Mad Men (2007-2015). These texts were chosen because of their extraordinary popularity and influence within their respective periods. Following a well-established tradition within the sociology of culture, this thesis operates with the conviction that popular works of art offer the sociologist privileged access to the inner life of social groups as they respond to specific historic moments.

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1 In the German case, the designation ‘sociologist’ is being applied retrospectively to recognise the nineteenth century works of social thinkers including Heinrich Riehl, Ferdinand Tönnies, Werner Sombart, Georg Simmel and Max Weber. While at the time these works were associated with disciplines including history, philosophy and political economy, they established many of the themes and perspectives that would shape sociology as a discipline. This broad definition is supported by Harry Liebersohn’s study of period Fate and Utopia in Germany Sociology, 1870-1923 (1990).
The first chapter in each of the cases attempts to capture the lived experience of the nascent middle class, how it formulates its self-understanding and begins to recognize the predicaments of its age. The second and fourth chapters provide retrospective portraits of the periods. With the benefit of hindsight, these works are more sophisticated and theoretically sensitive examinations. Typical of all historical interpretation, they disclose as much about their present as they do about the past. Both *Buddenbrooks* and *Mad Men* are explicitly genealogical, seeking to trace contemporary concerns back to their historic roots. In the process, they help to distinguish between what were temporal and situationally specific anxieties and what remain more enduring cultural problems.

In examining these periods, this thesis engages with a sociological narrative that developed in the wake of Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-1905). Weber argued that the modern West was founded on a Protestant cultural blueprint, its governing ethos extolled in the ‘fundamentally ascetic trait of middle-class life’ (Weber, 2001: 123). The fate of the middle class in this narrative becomes an indicator of the health of the wider cultural order. Weber’s prognosis was pessimistic. He forecast that with the loss of religious faith life would come to be experienced as disenchanted and ultimately meaningless. Despite its unparalleled material achievements, the modern West in this reading is suffering from a crisis of meaning, no longer able to answer the only really important question: ‘What shall we do and how shall we live?’ (Weber, 1958: 143). The ability to respond to this question will be an evaluative benchmark for what follows.

**‘Bourgeoisie’ and ‘Middle Class’**

Despite enduring scholarly attention, ‘bourgeoisie’ and ‘middle class’ remain notoriously ambiguous social categories. Most sociological definitions follow Karl Marx in seeking to locate a set of discrete material conditions. Indicators of social class are typically found in occupation, income, wealth and education. These approaches, whilst shedding light on constitutive elements of class, are prone to lose sight of the forest for the trees. As G. D. H. Cole in his influential study on theories of social stratification suggests:

> The concept of the middle class is exceedingly elusive, by whatever route one approaches it. Clearly membership of the middle class, or classes, is not simply a matter of income, either absolutely or of relative income within a particular social structure. Nor is it exclusively a matter of the nature and
source of the income received, or of profession or calling. Nor again is it exclusively a matter of education, or of manners; for no definition based on these will avail to mark off one part of the middle classes from the upper classes or another from the working class… This doesn’t mean that classes lose reality; but it does mean that their boundaries become more and more difficult to draw.

(Cole, 2013: 93-94)

If class cannot be apprehended directly through measurements of income, status and formal culture, then definitional problems appear to emerge from trying to impose too rigid taxonomies on something that has fluid borders. In this respect, artists have had more success than sociologists in grappling with the idea of ‘the bourgeoisie’ and ‘the middle class’. When Thomas Mann declared himself to be a ‘son of the bourgeoisie’ (Mann, 1938: 67) or when John Updike described his subject as ‘the Protestant middle class’ (as cited in Detweiler, 1984: 54), they were working with a specific mental image in mind. Class, treated in this artistic sense, whilst acknowledging the importance of concrete socio-economic conditions, focuses more upon delineating a constellation of shared values, beliefs and sentiments.

There is some sociological precedence for this approach. Max Weber’s ideal-type methodology in *The Protestant Ethic* inaugurated a rich vein of cultural investigations into social character. Influenced by neo-Kantian philosophy, Weber insisted that sociological enquiry was separated from the natural sciences by its need to comprehend the subjective meaning of social action in addition to documenting empirical reality. Through the construction of ideal-types, he sought to uncover the cluster of distinctive beliefs, values and psychological traits that could explain the general patterns of behaviour of particular social groups. With explicit reference to Weber’s study, sociologists in America including David Riesman, C. Wright Mills, Daniel Bell, Richard Sennett and Christopher Lasch have sought to define the American middle class through the construction of similar motivational typologies. This sociological method has strong affinities with the artistic approach identified above. In order to comprehend the motivations of their object of study, the artist and the sociologist share in an imaginative process. They must be able to relate to their subjects as human beings, drawing upon their wider understanding of the human condition to flesh out the inner meaning of their observations.²

² See, for example, Max Weber’s discussion of *Verstehen* (understanding): ‘It is a great help to be able to put one’s self imaginatively in the place of an actor and thus sympathetically to participate in his experiences’ (Weber as cited in Benton, 1977: 120). For extended discussions on the similarities between artistic and sociological methods see Robert Nisbet’s *Sociology as Art* (1962) and Robert Redfield’s *The Art of the Social Science* (1948).
In constructing its image of the German bourgeoisie and the American middle class, this thesis operates in an intermediary space between a purely artistic and an ideal-type sociological perspective. Through a close reading of its central text, each chapter aims to establish the essential characteristics of its period of enquiry. However, the methodology differs from the ideal-type model in terms of its overall objective. In constructing ideal types, sociologists accentuate certain aspects of social experience whilst depreciating what is seen as casually extraneous material. Consequently, as portraits of life, ideal types are by nature reductive. In contrast, by drawing out the multiple layers of meaning in the central text for each chapter, the aim is to maintain the dissonances and imperfections that are polished out of sociological ideal-types. While this thesis engages with the most influential sociological studies of the periods, no attempt is made to explicitly define ‘bourgeoisie’ and ‘middle class’. Instead, the meaning of these terms is held to emerge out of the wider story explored in each of the chapters. Employed in this cultural sense, the idea of class traces what Georg Lukács has helpfully described as a ‘life mood’ or a ‘way of life’ (1974: 55-78). Resisting stricter definition, it is a picture that emerges out of the attitudes and practices, beliefs and assumptions that constitute everyday life.

**Nietzsche and Weber: A Thesis of Cultural Decline**

I am a member of the bourgeois class. I feel myself to be a bourgeois and I have been brought up to share their views and ideals… [However] Today we are more sober, and it behoves us to try and lift the veil of illusions which hides from us the position of our generation… At our cradle stood the most frightful curse history can give any generation as a baptismal-gift: the hard fate of the political *epigone*.


These lines are taken from an address given by Max Weber in 1895. Read today, his conflicting sentiments are difficult to appreciate. Few would so readily identify with the bourgeois age or feel the burden of its legacy. Yet Weber’s thoughts capture the crisis of belief that engulfed the generation of artists, social critics and philosophers that came to maturity at the turn of the twentieth century. Many of the most incisive works of the period carried this sense of late-coming; a recognition that established modes of conduct were no longer suited to contemporary social realities. Readily identifying this sense of dislocation, intellectual historians commonly treat the period as formative in the development of modern
consciousness. Indeed, this generation raised questions about the conditions of life within secular capitalistic modernity that continue to reverberate through contemporary sociological discourse.

The overarching pessimism of the fin de siècle generation regarding the prospects of Western modernity was the original inspiration for this project. In particular, reading Max Weber alongside Thomas Mann raised questions over the long-term accuracy of their cultural diagnosis. Both Weber and Mann saw the bourgeois way of life as the last viable cultural form for Western Civilisation. They predicted that secularisation would be followed by cultural fragmentation, moral incoherence and a loss of meaning and purpose. While Weber and Mann gave authoritative voice to this thesis for their generation, their sense of cultural decline was formed under the shared influence of Friedrich Nietzsche. As Gerhard Hilbert, another member of their generation declared, ‘Nietzsche was a seismometer of modern Europe’s spiritual and intellectual life, a stamping ground and battlefield upon which its tensions, conflicts and possibilities were played out’ (as cited in Aschheim, 1992: 10). Consequently, any attempt to account for Weber and Mann’s thesis of Western cultural decline must necessarily begin with him.

Nietzsche’s sense of cultural crisis is most forcefully captured in his ‘Death of God’ parable (1882). It begins with a mad man running into a marketplace, the commercial heart of the modern secular West: ‘I seek God, I seek God!’ he declares (Nietzsche, 1974: 181). Ridiculed by a group of self-satisfied unbelievers, he responds with a series of increasingly harrowing and disjointed questions:

Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Wither is it moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backwards, sideward, forwards, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space?

(1974: 181)

With the Death of God, humanity confronts the void. Previously, religion had ‘granted man an absolute value, as opposed to his smallness and accidental occurrence in the flux of

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3 For exemplary intellectual histories that associate the period with the formation of the modern sensibility see H. Stuart Hughes’ Consciousness and Society (1974) and Gerhard Masur’s Prophets of Yesterday (1961).
becoming and passing away’ and thereby ‘prevented man from despising himself as man’ (Nietzsche, 1968: 10). Without divine legitimation, humanity now finds itself summarised in the mechanistic cosmos of Newton and Darwin. The post-religious world seems colder, more precarious and indifferent to human needs. For Nietzsche, this modern ‘fallen’ understanding of the human condition necessitates a radical reappraisal of all inherited beliefs and values. The parable ends with the mad man questioning the secular West’s capacity to justify human existence: ‘What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to be worthy of it?’ (Nietzsche, 1974: 181).

Nietzsche’s central argument is that each culture is founded on a myth, ‘a concentrated image of the world’ that ‘guides man’s interpretation of his life and his struggles’ (Nietzsche, 1993: 109). When this axiological principle becomes untenable, the entire value hierarchy of the culture loses coherence. He predicted that secularisation would be accompanied by the slow running down of the moral and ideological reserves of Western civilisation. Eventually, inherited cultural forms would lose their capacity to structure experience and humanity would succumb to a nihilistic vision of life as a procession of meaningless events that terminates in the ultimate absurdity of death. ‘What does nihilism mean?’ Nietzsche asks as gadfly to his age, ‘that supreme values devalue themselves. The goal is lacking. The answer is lacking to the question ‘Why? To what purpose?’ (Nietzsche, 1968: 9).

With prophetic pathos, Nietzsche warned that Western culture was heading inexorably towards its final creation: ‘the last man’ (Nietzsche, 1978: 18). Focused on minimising hardship whilst devoid of any life sustaining vitality, ‘One still works, for work is a form of entertainment. But one is careful lest this entertainment be too harrowing’ (1978: 18). The last man eschews individual goals and distinctions for the comfortable mediocrity of the crowd: ‘No shepherd and one herd! Everybody wants the same; everybody is the same: whoever feels different goes voluntarily into the madhouse’ (1978: 18) For Nietzsche, the last man is the apotheosis of liberal humanistic narratives that associate the emancipation from tradition, technological progress and rising levels of material prosperity with human flourishing: “‘We have invented happiness” say the last men, and they blink’ (1978: 18). Nietzsche’s portrait is a scathing critique of the consumeristic tendencies of modern Western culture. Without higher purpose, life is essentially reduced to a degraded form of Epicureanism; all that remains is the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain.
Max Weber’s Nietzschean vision of modern life found its first sustained articulation in *The Protestant Ethic*. Focusing on the rise of capitalism as the ‘the most fateful force in our modern life’, it is an extended meditation on the moral and religious foundations of the modern secular West (Weber, 2001: xxxi). Weber begins by asking why capitalism, with its rational organisation of labour and production and its systematic accumulation and investment of profit, first emerged exclusively in Western Europe. He argues that Marx’s theory of historical materialism, where culture is determined by its material base, was unable to explain the characterological transformation that accompanied the rise of capitalism. Instead, capitalism could only be accounted for by also acknowledging a determining role for *sui generis* cultural and psychological factors. Weber’s argument is well known and need not be outlined in detail here. What is important for this thesis is to establish Weber’s sense of the rise of the Protestant character type and its relationship to his pessimism over the fate of Western culture.

The essence of Weber’s argument is that the religious anxiety that arose out of the Protestant Reformation fostered a set of beliefs and personality traits conducive to the development of capitalism. Where traditionally, Catholicism had eased the individual’s existential burden through communal sacrament and the direction of religious authorities, the Protestant stood alone. Indeed, the highest locus of authority now rested within the individual conscience. Confronted with a distant and implacable God, the Protestant sought to garner a measure of religious consolation through the assiduous practice of a God-ordained vocation or calling. In the Protestant worldview, work becomes a form of prayer and worldly success confirmation of a state of grace. Consequently, idleness, profligacy and anything which could drive a wedge between the individual and God was seen as anathema. Emerging from the notion of vocation as religious duty, the Protestant ideal was a pious, industrious and ordered existence that brought a spiritual gravity to the minutiae of everyday life. The practical result was a this-worldly asceticism that at once led towards the accumulation of capital and imposed strictures upon its sensual enjoyment. Ultimately, Weber maintains, this ethic ‘favoured the development of ‘rational bourgeois economic life’ and ‘stood at the cradle of modern economic man’ (2001: 117).

In Weber’s fatalistic reading, the Protestant ethic with its emphasis on personal conscience, self-mastery and firm sense of individual purpose, was the last viable cultural form for
Western civilisation. The enduring irony of modernity is that behaviour that was once an expression of intense religious sentiment has become a reified end unto itself. Today the spirit that had originally motivated economic life has fled the ‘iron cage’ of the capitalist order leaving only the worship of production and efficiency:

The Puritan wanted to work for a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and begun to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the life of all individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force.

(Weber, 2001: 123)

Beginning in the economy, this process of rationalisation has spread outwards to encompass all facets of public life. The exemplar is modern bureaucracy. Weber argues that the bureaucratic ideal is approached ‘the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational and emotional elements which escape calculation’ (Weber, 1968: 975). Weber’s thought is saturated with the sense of increasing conflict between the human desire for affective, intimate and meaningful personal experience and the rational and bureaucratic stultification that threatens to pervade all aspects of life. The Protestant Ethic concludes with an image of prophetic despair reminiscent of Nietzsche’s last man:

For the last stage of this cultural development it might well be truly said “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved”.

(Weber: 2001: 124)

Weber extended his reflections on the conditions of modern life in a public lecture entitled Science as Vocation (1917). Echoing Nietzsche’s Death of God, his focus lies in evaluating the possibility of finding meaning in the post-Christian world. He begins by tracing the metaphysical roots of the rational-scientific worldview that predominates in the modern West. Historically, science had been conceived as a way to true being (Plato); a way to true art (Leonardo Da Vinci); a way to the natural world (Francis Bacon); and as a path to human happiness in the utilitarian ideals that dominated the nineteenth century. However, Weber
argues that by the beginning of the twentieth century, science has outgrown its former idealism. The modern scientific ethos rests on the premise that ‘there are no mysterious and incalculable forces that need to be invoked to explain the natural world’ (Weber, 1946: 139). Instead, ‘one can in principle master all things by calculation’ (1946: 139). Pivotal for Weber, the rational-scientific culture of modernity has undermined the authority of Christian metaphysics whilst simultaneously dismissing questions of ultimate meaning as beyond the domain of its enquiry. Consequently, while the world has become increasingly comprehensible instrumentally, it has become correspondingly meaningless in moral and religious terms. In Weber’s decisive formulation, this process of ‘intellectualisation and rationalisation’ has led inexorably to ‘the disenchantment of the world’ (1946: 155).

Once this fateful correlation has been established, Weber turns to Leo Tolstoy to flesh out the implications of disenchantment. Tolstoy believed that the pre-modern individual could die content, ‘because his life in terms of its meaning… had given to him what it had to offer’, consequently, ‘there remained no puzzle he might wish to solve’ (Weber, 1946: 140). The pivotal distinction for Tolstoy is between the immanent sense of meaning in pre-modern times and the restless progressiveness that characterises modernity: amidst this ‘continuous enrichment of culture by ideas, knowledge, and problems’ one may become “‘tired of life” but not “satiated with life’” (1946: 139-140). Death under such conditions can only be an arbitrary and meaningless terminus and ‘because death is meaningless, civilized life as such is meaningless’ (1946: 140). Under the spectre of Tolstoy’s musings, Weber returns to reflections on the meaning of science in the modern world. He acknowledges that while remaining instrumentally useful, science is congenitally unable to produce orientating values. In this regard, ‘Tolstoy has given us the simplest answer, with the words: science is meaningless because it gives no answer to the question, the only question that is important to us: ‘What shall we do and how shall we live?’ (1946: 143).

For Weber, the inability to respond to Tolstoy’s question is Western modernity’s central failing. Through its assertion of natural causality, science has undermined the religious postulate of an ordered and meaningful world. The decline of religion has also disrupted wider value hierarchies. Where once the various value spheres—religion, science, politics, economics, aesthetics and the erotic—were integrated within a religiously governed hierarchy, today each operates in accordance with its own presuppositions. These value spheres repeatedly come into conflict and attenuate the claims of one another. Consequently,
the values they contain have lost their absolute and imperative quality and have become existential choices between differentiated and irreconcilable perspectives:

So long as life remains immanent and interpreted in its own terms, it knows only an unceasing struggle of these gods with one another. The ultimate possible attitudes to life are irreconcilable, and hence their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion.

(Weber, 1946: 152)

Weber’s image of modern life is one of ebbing faith, inductive scepticism and acute relativity. No longer part of a unified worldview, ‘the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life’ and today hold authority only within ‘the smallest and most intimate circles’ (Weber, 1946: 155). While Weber believed it was still possible to make an ‘intellectual sacrifice’ and return to the comforting embrace of the church, he warned against the attempt to construct ‘new religions without a new and genuine prophecy’ (1946: 154-155). Anticipating the rise of communism and fascism in the twentieth century, he declared that these movements would ‘create only fanatical sects but never genuine community’ (1946: 155). Ultimately, Weber attributes all forms of political idealism to lack of intellectual honesty and nerve, ‘for it is a weakness not to be able to countenance the stern seriousness of our fateful times’ (1946: 149). Without the consolations of faith, Weber can only recommend a posture of stoic fortitude. He beseeched his audience to accept that they are fated to live in a ‘godless and prophetless time’ (1946: 153), and to soberly turn themselves to meeting ‘the demands of the day’ (1946: 156).

Nietzsche and Weber’s thesis of cultural decline provides the theoretical framework through which the German and American case studies are read. According to their thesis, the Death of God should be accompanied by a growing sense that life is meaningless and therefore no pursuit is really worthwhile. A further aspect of their thesis relates to the types of individuals that will come to inhabit the modern world. Nietzsche depicted ‘man in decay, that is to say diminishment, in the process of becoming mediocre and losing his value’ (1973: 126). While more restrained, the overarching argument of The Protestant Ethic is the same. Weber’s narrative traces how the religious asceticism of his Protestant hero has dissolved into utilitarian worldliness. A final shared concern is the rise of consumer society. Western modernity is held to have abandoned higher ideals for this-worldly consolations. At the end of this bleak trajectory lies the last man, the epitome of an aimless and dispirited existence.
Through a close reading of its four central texts, this thesis aims to assess the accuracy of this prognosis. The examination is guided by a series of questions. Does the Death of God necessarily lead to the collapse of morality and meaning? If not, to what extent did Nietzsche and Weber misread the climate of the modern West? And finally, what does this portend for modern individuals in their search for meaningful lives?

Thesis Rationale and Approach

Having established the guiding questions of this thesis, it is necessary to consider issues of rationale and approach. Firstly, the decision to examine novels in Germany and television in America needs further clarification. Within sociological and literary circles, the novel has long been regarded as the preeminent bourgeois aesthetic form. From its eighteenth century beginnings, the emergence of the novel is held to have been intimately related to European industrialisation, the growth of commercial capitalism and the rise of the middle class (Watts, 2001). In G.W. F. Hegel’s decisive formulation, the novel was ‘the bourgeois epopee’, the ideal form for grasping ‘a reality whose regime has already become prose’ (as cited in Houlab, 1991: 175). Extending upon Hegel’s observation, Georg Lukács in The Theory of the Novel (1904) insists that the aesthetic evolution of the novel mirrored developments in bourgeois self-understanding. Lukács traces the increasingly pessimistic tenor of bourgeois self-reflexivity from mid-nineteenth century realism’s confident exploration of its social milieu to modernism’s solipsistic preoccupation with the self. Following this ground-breaking work, exemplary scholarship in the sociology of literature—including Leo Löwenthal’s Literature and the Image of Man (1957), Ernest Bramsted’s Aristocracy and the Middle Class in Germany (1964), and Cesar Grana’s Bohemian versus Bourgeois (1964)—has focused upon the novel as the most effective medium through which to examine the beliefs, hopes and anxieties of the nineteenth century bourgeoisie. In its close reading of Freytag and Mann, this thesis readily identifies with this approach.

The decision to examine American television was based on similar considerations. The rise of the American middle class in the 1950s was accompanied by the emergence of television as a dominant artistic medium. Much like the novel in the nineteenth century, early television

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4 While the literature is vast, exemplars include Georg Lukács’ Theory of the Novel (1914), Leo Löwenthal’s Literature and the Image of Man (1957) and Ian Watt’s The Rise of the Novel (2001).
domestic comedies articulated a confident and ordered world that spoke directly to their fledgling audience. Since the late 1990’s cable television shows including The Sopranos (1999-2007), The Wire (2002-2008) and Deadwood (2004-2006) have been indicative of the increasing sophistication of the medium. The extended narrative arcs, complex characters and existential themes that occupy the best of modern television have drawn repeated comparisons to the novelistic form. Today, many critics treat these exemplary television series with a reverence that was previously reserved for high art. As a result, it seems reasonable to suggest that television is undergoing a comparable aesthetic evolution to the nineteenth century novel.

An equally important consideration was the popularity of the texts. Gustav Freytag’s Debit and Credit and Thomas Mann’s Buddenbrooks were the best-selling German novels of the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century respectively. The extraordinary commercial success of these novels suggests that they resonated with a broad section of the reading public. Following on from this, the two American texts were also chosen for their remarkable popularity. Throughout the late 1950’s Father Knows Best remained at the top of the Neilson ratings and has been in repeated syndication ever since. The prototypical domestic comedy, it has become an iconic representation of mid-century life that continues to resound in the American cultural imagination. Of the four case studies, the popularity of Mad Men is hardest to definitively gauge. Whilst ranking well in the Nielsol polls, these figures do not account for the DVD sales, downloads and recorded viewings that make up a sizeable part of Mad Men’s audience. Consequently, in the absence of reliable viewership figures, cultural influence has been taken into consideration. As television critic Lynn Elber helpfully suggests, ‘when considering this much larger, under-the-radar-sized audience for AMC’s signature series, it is much easier to understand why it’s “Mad Men” that is permeating the zeitgeist’ (Elber, 2009). As a result, although exact figures on Mad Men’s audience are unavailable, the pervasive cultural influence of the series warrants its inclusion in this study.

Finally, it is necessary to outline the analytical approach that guides the following chapters. As previously stated, this thesis operates with the conviction that popular artworks provide a

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5 See in particular Alex Schilman, ‘The Sopranos: An American Existentialism?’ (2010). The similarities between the novelistic form and modern cable television dramas will be addressed in greater detail in chapter three.
unique window into the beliefs, values and anxieties of their age. While this perspective has a long-established pedigree within cultural sociology and literary criticism, some qualification is necessary. In considering the extent to which sociologists can treat literary works as an accurate representation of social realities, Ernest Bramsted makes an observation that can be fruitfully expanded into a more general sociological approach to art:

Today a serious social novel implies just as exact an empirical knowledge of its subject as does scientific sociological analysis. Although, in contrast with science, the novel does not verify its results with the help of statistical method, it works with a combination of observation and intuition, involving the risk of inaccuracy, but conferring the advantage of a greater approximation of life.

(Bramsted, 1964: 2)

Any study of cultural works then is inevitably confronted by questions of verisimilitude. Cultural sociologists have typically sought to overcome these questions by grounding the text they are examining in a wider understanding of its cultural and historical milieu. Again, the sociology of literature provides a useful model of enquiry. As Leo Löwenthal suggests:

It is the task of the sociologist of literature to relate the experience of the writer’s imaginary characters and situations to the historical climate from which they derive. He has to transform the private equation of themes and stylistic means into social equations.

(Löwenthal, 1957: 2)

Echoing this approach, the German and American cases open with a sketch of the socio-historical terrain. A range of historical, sociological and artistic sources are drawn upon to establish a wider context for each section before the close reading of its core texts. Each chapter then concludes by relating the themes that emerge back to this wider context. However, it is important to emphasise that this thesis does not attempt to make holistic claims about the periods under examination. Indeed, the extraordinary amount of scholarly attention that the two periods have received makes any such claims difficult to sustain. Instead, the analysis follows the example of Ernest Bramsted and Leo Löwenthal. While it is necessary to achieve a degree of sociological objectivity by grounding these stories in their milieu, the focus ultimately remains on the lived experience of each of the periods that is captured in each of the four stories.
2- The German Bürgertum

German character still typically reveals itself under the sign of what I call the bürgerly nature

(Thomas Mann, 1918/1983: 102; my italics)

Any attempt to locate the German middle class is confronted by semantic drift in the meaning of Bürgertum and Bürgerlichkeit. In its earliest usage, Bürgertum referred to the economically independent patrician merchants of the medieval and early modern free cities. As a group, they were united through their shared lifestyle, status and economic and legal privileges (Kocka, 1993: 3). By the end of the eighteenth century, this term had expanded to include Bildung (education) and Besitz (property) as grounds for admittance into the Bürgertum. The expanded Bürgertum now incorporated the Bildungsbürgertum (civil servants, lawyers, teachers and members of professions requiring university education) and the nascent Besitzbürgertum (businessmen, entrepreneurs, merchants, managers, and others) (Kocka, 1993). Consequently, as a class indicant, the term Bürgertum was increasingly amorphous, reflecting a wide range of occupational groups, income levels and differing legal and political rights. This heterogeneity has led Wolfgang Kaschuba to suggest:

Bürgerlichkeit… is anything but a systematic category; rather it has a descriptive or associative quality. The term refers to attitudes and cultural factors and does not lend itself to a clear sociological categorisation. Bürgertum and Bürgerlichkeit (bourgeois mentality, culture and lifestyle) are not congruent.

(Kaschuba, 1993: 392-393)

While it is reductive to speak of the Bürgertum as a homogenous social class, its disparate elements were united though a shared cultural orientation. The bürgersche Weltanschauung endorsed a constellation of values including ideals of work, education, self-improvement, personal achievement, civic participation and the desire for economic and political reform. In the first half of the nineteenth century the Bildungsbürgertum were the dominant influence on the wider Bürgertum. Prior to 1848, they maintained a virtual monopoly on political representation and were the arbiters of culture and taste. Following the revolution, the
rapidity of German industrialisation saw the rise in political and economic influence and social prestige of the *Besitzbürgertum*. Through the increased prosperity and social mobility that accompanied economic development, *Bürgerlichkeit* moved from being a largely exclusory category to a widely attainable cultural ideal. The *Besitzbürgertum*’s growing influence and belief in the universal applicability of its values saw *Bürgerlichkeit* increasingly permeate all stratas of German life.

In the following discussion, the term *Bürgerlichkeit* is used in the broad sense of a middle-class cultural disposition. In alignment with the growing influence of the *Besitzbürgertum*, the focus is upon the articulation of *Bürgerlichkeit* in Gustav Freytag’s 1855 novel of commercial life, *Debit and Credit*. As the most popular German novel in the second half of the nineteenth century, it was pivotal both as a contemporary document of the Bürgertum’s self-understanding and as a disseminator of cultural standards. Before moving to the novel, it is fruitful to consider its socio-historical context. As a social artefact, literature is as much shaped by the internal aims and prejudices of its author as by the external social reality. By locating the novel within its contemporary climate this chapter aims to avoid subjective distortion by bringing its central themes into a wider dialogue with the Zeitgeist.

**The Bürgertum: A Topography**

In contrast to the English and French models, German middle-class identity was forged by political failure. The political revolutions of 1848, which collectively represented the greatest middle-class movement in Europe since 1789, proved little more than a ripple on the surface of German political life. Inspired by the February revolutions in France, the Frankfurt National Assembly was formed in March 1848 with the aim of developing a parliamentary and constitutional basis for a unified Germany. Within a year, the assembly had dissolved and with it liberal hopes for equal civic rights and political representation. With the reestablishment of the *Deutsche Bund* (German Confederation) in 1850, and the growing dominance of Prussia, the short lived political hopes of German liberals faded under years of political reaction and the reinstatement of absolutism.

For many liberals, the failure at Frankfurt necessitated a reappraisal of objectives. German middle class discourse post-revolution was increasingly marked by an ideological shift from
classic liberal objectives to what Wolfgang Mommsen has described as ‘the alienation of the liberal ideal through imperialist ideology’ (Mommsen as cited in Fitzpatrick, 2008: 2). The rise of Prussia, and its promise of a unified Germany, saw the middle class subordinate its political aspirations to the more pressing demand for national unity.¹ Where the political rights achieved in the revolution were repealed, the economic liberties that had been won remained intact. Consequently, middle-class focus shifted to the economic sphere, in the process sublimating political frustration into the economic dynamism that characterises late nineteenth century Germany.

Following the political realignment of the Bürgertum, the 1850’s was the period when the revolutionary energy Marx located in the Manchester bourgeoisie made a forcible imprint upon German soil.² In a decade where industrial production doubled, the emergence of railways and steam power provided iconographical confirmation of Heinrich Riehl’s 1851 assertion that ‘the Bürgertum incontestably constitute the dominant force of our time’ leading him to maintain that ‘our entire era has a bürgerlich stamp’ (Riehl, 1990: 205). Throughout the 1850’s, the German railway network nearly doubled in size from 5,856 to 11,175 kilometres (Feuchtwanger, 2001: 7). The result was reduced material and production costs, expanding markets and a growing sense of economic interconnectedness. Socially, the railways linked previously distant principalities, fostering the nascent sense of national identity. The burgeoning transportation network also stimulated other industries particularly coal, iron and steel:

¹ This ideological shift is most apparent in the formation of the Nationalverein (National Association) in 1859 which campaigned for national unification under Prussian leadership. In 1867, the German National Liberal Party was formed as an offshoot of the Nationalverein. It became the most powerful political party and an avid supporter of Bismarck in the early years of Germany Empire (Biesinger, 2006: 589). As K. Belgum has suggested, ‘by 1867, with the founding of the German National Liberal Party, the shift had acquired a clear political home and name’ (Belgum, 2001: 33).

² Any attempt to define a specific historical point as the onset of the German industrialisation is subject to criticisms of reductionism. While the historical antecedents and factors involved in German Industrialisation are complex, the 1850s are widely accepted to be the locale of most significant cultural and structural transformations that led to the solidification of German middle-class consciousness. For extended discussions on the importance of the period see particularly (Applebaum, 1992: 409-428, Blackbourn, 1997: 175-224, Bramsted, 1964: 107-149 and Wehler, 1985: 9-31).
From the development of heavy industry, there was a spillover into building construction, textiles and consumer goods. The growth of industry was further fostered by a shift in Prussian economic policy. In the 1850s, Prussia moved from the mercantile paternalism and suspicion of enterprise of pre-revolution Germany, to a supportive, forward looking attitude towards industry. The expansion of the Zollverein (German Customs Union) coupled with progressive banking reforms increased access to capital and led to a growth in joint-stock companies. These changes, and the accompanying rise in wealth and stability of the Bürgertum, served to engender a mood of optimism, excitement and speculation.

The growth in middle-class confidence was further evident in the intellectual climate. The esteem for the humanistic values that had dominated the German educational system since Alexander von Humboldt’s institutionalisation of the gospel of Bildung (self-cultivation) was increasingly supplemented by attention to the practical demands of the day. Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, the Bürgertum found philosophical support in the materialist philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach and Ludwig Büchner. The Germanic enthusiasm for grand system building was now attended by the scientific drive towards the empirically verifiable and pragmatic. Consequently, faith in science increasingly supplanted religious and philosophic
ideals (Field, 1975: 81). This transition was most noticeable in the growth of technical institutions and vocational schools that attracted the children of businessmen (Blackbourn, 1997: 211-212, Sagarra, 1971: 194, Sheehan, 1991: 802-820). On a cultural level, it reflected a decline in the dominance of the Bildungsbürgertum and a growing space for the more materialistically based values of the Besitzbürgertum. On an individual level, the result was a gradual diminution of the idealistic and aesthetic aspects of education and a tendency towards practicality and vocational specialisation.

The period also witnessed the growth of etiquette manuals, fashion writers and family journals—elements of what Norbert Elias referred to as the Civilising Process—that contributed to the development of a collective sense of style and identity (Blackbourn, 1997: 207, Elias, 1978). In place of aristocratic standards of taste, the gentlemanly ideal grew in influence. Trends in ladies and gentlemen’s fashion were embraced in distinction from the modes of dress of the aristocracy and lower classes. Home journals like die Gartenlaube had a wide circulation and celebrated the middle-class values of education, self-sufficiency, industry and solid domesticity as integral to the good life. Politically, die Gartenlaube captured the admixture of nationalism and liberalism that was particular to the Bürgertum’s sense of identity in the period of political restoration following 1848 (Fitzpatrick, 2008: 177-194).

Finally, the proliferation of voluntary associations (Vereine) from the 1830’s onwards, was indicative of the Bürgertum’s desire for moral leadership. Societies were formed that tackled a variety of social issues from public drunkenness to children’s education. With the decline of church influence and the remoteness of the state in local affairs, these associations functioned as proxy moral custodians of society (Blackbourn & Eley, 1984: 195-205). By the 1850s, then, the German middle class had announced its sense of moral and economic leadership. Its confidence was built upon rising levels of material prosperity, cultural influence and faith in the moral rectitude and universal applicability of its core values.³ This sense of rectitude extended to trenchant criticism of other forms of life, in particular those of the aristocracy and the cosmopolitan bourgeoisie.

³See, for instance, Heinrich von Treitschke's assertion that 'The middle strata of society among which this new culture sprang to life came to such an extent to occupy the foreground of the national life that Germany, more than any other country, became a land of the middle class; the moral judgment and the artistic taste of the middle class were the determinants of public opinion' (Treitschke, 1915: 101).
This sense of rising power and the right to moral leadership is the central theme of German literature of the period. In sharp contrast to the romantic heroes that had dominated late eighteenth and early nineteenth century literature, novelists like Auerbach, Freytag, Raabe, Spielhagen, and Storm found their heroes in everyday life. Where Goethe’s archetypal heroes in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) and *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795-96) had eschewed middle-class existence as flat, prosaic and stifling to the soul and sought meaning outside its limited conventions and horizons, these novelists rejected the detachment, excessive inwardness and affectation of the romantic worldview. Collectively referred to as ‘poetic realists’, they extolled the poetics of middle-class life, finding a sense of adventure, honour and duty where others had seen drudgery, exploitation and dependence and a sense of meaning where others found disenchantment. In the main, they were political conservatives who accepted the abiding structure of society. As a group, they were united in their unswerving emphasis on work and family as the twin pillars of *bürgerlich* existence.

**Debit and Credit and the German Ideal**

Across Europe and America throughout the nineteenth century, the rise of the bourgeoisie was accompanied by almost universal appreciation of the value of work.⁴ For the nascent bourgeoisie, values of industry, diligence, honesty and thrift, in short, the values expressed in their attitude to work, announced their sense of moral superiority over the profligacy and decadence of the feudal worldview. Work was the glue that both solidified bourgeois identity and assured its leadership of the new epoch. In an era marked by growing secularisation and materialism, work became an anodyne for religious decline and an expression of faith in social and moral progress.

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⁴ See, for instance, Adriano Tilgher’s discussion of the period: ‘The nineteenth century was the Golden Age for the idea of work. It saw the acceptance of universal conscription in the army of labor, the spectacle of the whole race toiling. But even more characteristic and more important for our enquiry was the attitude towards work of the century’s leading thinkers, of its philosophers, who exalted the idea of work to a position far beyond anything it had held in religion or ethics, making it the cause of all human progress, material, intellectual and spiritual (Tilgher, 1977: 90).
The work ethic, as it was presented in the work and life of Benjamin Franklin, found a wide and receptive audience throughout Germany in the second half of the nineteenth century.\(^5\) For the emergent *Besitzbürgertum*, the virtues embodied in Franklin held didactic import. Franklin, as one essayist wrote, was considered to be ‘the personification of practical utility: one whose life must prove an example for youth and manhood’ (Victory, 1915: 103). This esteem found its most direct literary representation in Berthold Auerbach’s *Villa Eden: The Country House on the Rhine* (1869). The novel is structured upon the contrast, widely employed in German discourse, between an effete and indulgent aristocracy, a cosmopolitan bourgeoisie, and the virtuous and industrious Germans moored in tradition against the impersonal and atomised social relations of Western capitalism. The cosmopolitan bourgeoisie, exemplified in the American millionaire Sonnenkamp, are portrayed as a corruption of the classic type. Overly selfish, excessively materialistic and with a purely instrumental and exploitative understanding of the world, they epitomise the dangers of capitalism without an ethical framework.

In *Villa Eden*, the model bequeathed by the new world is now employed rhetorically in condemnation of its excesses. Throughout the novel, Sonnenkamp pursues an aristocratic title for his son—further evidence of his alienation from classic bourgeois values—an ultimately futile endeavour when he is exposed as having amassed his fortune through the slave trade. In contrast, the classic bourgeois values historically represented by Benjamin Franklin are now seen to be embodied in the German middle class. Entrusted with educating Sonnenkamp’s son, the hero of the novel stumbles upon the educational ideal in a copy of the works of Franklin annotated by his father:

> Understand me well. I say, I know in modern history no other man, according to whose method of living and thinking a man of our day can form himself, except Benjamin Franklin… Franklin is the man of sober understanding, who knows nothing of enthusiasm. The world would not have much beauty if all human beings were like Franklin; his nature is wholly destitute of the romantic element… but the world would have uprightness, truthfulness, industriousness and helpfulness… he is the self-made man.

\[(Auerbach, 1871: 106)\]

\(^5\) As early as the 1780s Franklin’s was well-regarded in Germany (Blackbourn, 1998: 43). This influence grew throughout the nineteenth century. In the 1850s at least four biographies of Franklin were published and he was referred to widely in literary and academic circles (Victory, 1915: 17).
It is these values, now embodied in the German hero, that are transmitted to the younger Sonnenkamp thereby redeeming him from his father’s immorality.

For Auerbach, it is the German middle class shaped in Franklin’s image that will provide the moral and economic foundation for a healthy German nation. It is an ideal of nation and self, built on a conception of work as both self-improvement and social progress. In contrast to other forms of existence, the German middle class distinguishes itself through its capacity for ethical and socially useful work. For Auerbach, the bourgeois work ethic must be disseminated to the rest of the nation for ‘it is the chief virtue, whose possession brings with it automatically, as it were, all the subsidiary virtues’ (as cited in Bramsted, 1964: 112).

The German work ethic found its most enduring and comprehensive expression in Gustav Freytag’s *Debit and Credit*. First published in 1855, the novel was an immediate bestseller and went on to become ‘the most widely read of all German novels’ in the second half of the nineteenth century (Mehring as cited in Belgum, 1991: 79). As one eminent critic maintained, ‘no book in the German language, with the exception of the Bible, has enjoyed in its day so wide a circulation’ (Henderson, 1914: 1). For the Bürgertum, it became a manifesto, a gift given to sons on graduation or entrance into working life (Bunsen, 1858: vii). Within fifteen years of publication it had gone through thirty presses and its popularity continued to grow throughout the years following German unification and leading up to World War 1.6

As a homily to the Bürgertum, the narrative of *Debit and Credit* revolves around the struggles of the virtuous German businessman Anton Wohlfart, ‘our hero’ as Freytag describes him (Freytag, 1858:40). The novel commences with a young ‘Wohlfart’—literally ‘travel well’—leaving his provincial hometown to take up a position in the merchant trading firm of T. O. Schröter. On his way to the capital, Wohlfart travels through the estate of the Baron Rothsattel. Impressed by the voluptuousness and refinement of the aristocratic world, he becomes infatuated with the Baron’s high-spirited daughter Lenore. Further down the road, he encounters an old school associate, the Jew Veitel Itzig, who is heading to Breslau to make his fortune. These two influences—the aristocratic and the Jewish—are to shape Wohlfart’s

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future life. Upon reaching the capital, Wohlfart heads to Schröter’s firm while Itzig seeks out employment with the Jewish money lender Hirsch Ehrenthal.

Initially overwhelmed by the strange new world of business, Wohlfart proves an adept student and quickly establishes himself. At work, he meets the aristocratic but thoroughly Americanised Herr von Fink who introduces him to Breslau’s high society. Seduced for a time by the aristocratic life and his renewed acquaintance with Lenore, his extravagant lifestyle is a source of consternation at the firm. Ultimately, this lifestyle proves untenable for a clerk of limited means, and somewhat ashamed of his indiscretion, he returns to his vocation with renewed vigour. Soon after, Fink, tired of the drudgery of German merchant life, heeds the calling of his restless nature and seeks fortune and adventure in America. Upon arriving in America he is quickly embroiled in ‘the wild speculations so common on the other side of the Atlantic’ (Freytag, 1858: 248).

Throughout the novel, Wohlfart’s progression is juxtaposed with the nefarious rise of Itzig. Through the services of a debauched ex-lawyer, Itzig is initiated into the loopholes of the law. He becomes an expert in promissory notes, and ruthlessly pursues his business in legally grey areas. Meanwhile, the Baron’s fortunes have begun to fail. Unable to support his lavish lifestyle on the income from his estate, he is encouraged by Hirsch Ehrenthal to borrow against it. In a vain attempt to maintain economic relevance, he borrows further to establish a sugar beet factory. When the factory fails, the Baron is at the mercy of the Jewish usurers. The estate is sold and the Rothsattels are forced to relocate to Poland. At the bequest of Lenore and against the advice of Schröter, Wohlfart resigns from the firm and follows the family to Poland to restore order to their finances. Despite Wohlfart’s help, the Rothsattel’s refuse to implement his ideas and the estate fairs poorly. Wohlfart grows increasingly frustrated with the Rothsattel’s financial irresponsibility, leading to a reappraisal of his feelings for Lenore. The troubles are resolved when Fink returns from America, marries Lenore and purchases the Polish estate. Displaying American ingenuity, he quickly turns it into a viable economic prospect.

Freed from his responsibilities to the Rothsattels, Wohlfart, now a bürgerlich prodigal son, returns to Schröter’s firm. Initially treated with cool reserve, he re-establishes himself as an integral part of the firm. In an unexpected turn of events, Itzig is implicated in the Rothsattel’s financial demise through the manipulation of fraudulent documents. Fearing
exposure, he murders his lawyer and is soon hounded by guilt to his own demise. In the final chapters of the novel order is re-established in the bürgerlich world. Through Wohlfart’s intercession Rothsattel is restored to his ancestral estate. Fully returned to Schröter’s confidence, Wohlfart, in turn, becomes engaged to his sister Sabine and a full partner in T.O. Schröter & Company.

In the preface to Debit and Credit, Freytag maintained that his objective was to galvanise middle-class confidence in the period of restoration by showing ‘the people, for their encouragement and elevation, as in a mirror, what they are capable of doing’ (Freytag, 1858: xxiii). This mirror refracts an admixture of nostalgia, reality, and hope. The Bürgertum is shown to be in a process of negotiation between its historic self-conception, the contemporary socio-political reality, and its aspiration for a positive role in German national life.7

Through his portrayal of bürgerlich life, Freytag affects a trans-valuation of the liberal defeat of 1848. Participating in a line of German thought that runs from Martin Luther to Thomas Mann’s World War One polemic Reflections of a Non-political Man (1918), he wished to show the German Bürgertum that its essence lies not in politics but in its capacity for assiduous work and collective subordination to national interest. Political recalcitrance transfigured becomes a moral virtue: a product of the uniquely Prussian Protestant respect for order, authority, and diligent application within one’s allotted station. Against a political sense of identity, Freytag locates ‘the German people where they can be found to be most competent, namely at work’ (Freytag, 1858: 1). Through his glorification of work, Freytag associates bürgerlich values with the ‘real Volk’ (Sheehan, 1979: 28). Amidst the economic transformation of the 1850s, the bürgerlich work ethic is shown to be the constitutive spirit of the times and the harbinger of all future prosperity and progress. As James Sheehan has suggested, the 1850s saw the middle class move beyond a purely social denotation to become a moral ideal (Sheehan, 1978: 26). As the ‘real Volk,’ it ‘was the centre of society, the seat of social virtue, the vehicle for harmony and compromise’ (Sheehan, 1979: 28).

7 As Peter Hohendahl suggests, ‘the poetization of reality, of which German realism is so often accused, had less to do with narrow-mindedness than with the belief that a still imperfect empirical-historical reality had to be brought into harmonious perfection in the aesthetic sphere. The work of art was to create a totality reaching beyond the empirical elements of reality’ (Hohendahl, 1989: 113).
The city of Breslau, where the novel takes place, was a thriving commercial centre in the 1850s. As early as 1842, its industrial development had been described as ‘the equal of England, and foremost on the continent of Europe’ (Henderson, 1975: 137). While this is almost certainly an overstatement, the 1850s saw the development of railways linking Breslau to the industrial areas of northern Silesia and markets throughout Europe. With the establishment of the Bank of Silesia, Breslau was also pivotal in supplying capital to the mining and textile industries (Henderson, 1975: 123-139). In locating his ideal of working life, Freytag overlooks the expansion of the heavy industry and the financial sector that increasingly characterised Breslau in the 1850s. Instead, he focuses upon a patrician trading firm which he acknowledges was from an older economic world.⁸

The business was a warehouse business, and nowadays there are fewer and fewer of these; nowadays, when railroads and telegraphs connect the seas with the inland areas, when every merchant from the coastal cities can have his goods sold deep in the interior of a country through his agents almost before they arrive in port; nowadays this type of business has become so infrequent that our descendants will find this kind of trade no less strange than we find the market bartering in Timbuktu or in a Kaffir kraal.

(Freytag, 1858: 47)

In his economic history of Europe, Werner Sombart demarcates three epochs in European capitalist development: early capitalism from the middle of the thirteenth to the middle of the nineteenth century, high capitalism from the middle of the nineteenth century up to World War One, and late capitalism the period after 1914. In the early capitalist stage, business practice abided by the maxim that ‘human welfare is the pivot of all economic organisation’ (Sombart, 2001: 165). Consequently, customer bases were strictly demarcated and the poaching of clientele, underselling, and self-promotion were considered ‘contemptible, unchristian and immoral’ (2001: 161). As a period of moderate progressiveness, technological innovation was embraced only insofar as it did not have a deleterious effect on the lives of workers. Ethically, commercial activity remained indentured to tradition. The use of credit for the expansion of business was still met with suspicion and commercial activity was predominantly based on the local trade of ready-to-hand tangible goods. While this mode of trade continued into the 1850s in Germany, it was increasingly anachronistic.

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⁸ This model appears to have been informed by Freytag’s close association in the 1840s with the head of the Breslau chamber of commerce, the prominent Silesian merchant Theodor Molinari. In Molinari Freytag found an exemplar of liberal conviction with a strong social conscience (Ping, 2006: 99).
Consequently, contract trade, where goods were no longer bought in person but ‘ordered directly from small samples’, was becoming the dominant mode of transaction (Bramsted, 1974: 117). Before the establishment of the German cartels of the late nineteenth century, monopolisation of production and distribution was still seen to be an aberrant constriction of the circulation of trade that deprived individuals of their right to earn a livelihood. Consequently, the business ideal remained the small to medium-sized independent merchant.

In the period of high capitalism, there is a progressive shift away from this ideal. As the inherent logic of capitalism demands expansion beyond parochial borders and the yoke of tradition, the service of human needs that legitimised the early period is increasingly superseded by purely economic imperatives. Sombart shares Marx’s vision of the Faustian bourgeois, engaged in a perennial cycle of creation and destruction. In contrast to the ordered pace of the previous epoch, the rhythm of life is now determined by the imperative to be bigger, faster, newer, and more powerful (Sombart, 2001: 176). In this maelstrom of progress, stability is anathema, synonymous with ossification and decline. It is against this restless image of the modern economy that Freytag anchors Schröter’s firm in the bedrock of traditional merchant capitalism:

The importance of such a mercantile house as this depended upon the quantity of stores it bought with its own money and at its own risk. Of these, a great part lay in long rows of warehouses along the river, some in the vaults of the old house itself, and some in the warehouses and stores of those around. Most of the tradesmen of the province provided themselves with colonial produce from the warehouses of the firm, whose agents were spread to east and south, and carried on, even as far as the Turkish frontier, a business which, if less regular and secure than the home trade, was often more lucrative than any other.

(Freytag, 1858: 48)

Freytag’s Bürgertum, then, sit at the cusp of the high capitalist period. Schroder’s trade is increasingly dependent on world markets but remains moored in a traditionalist ethic and is an integral part of the local social fabric. Against the restlessness of the modern capitalist spirit, the traditional operative procedures of the firm remain a stable and enduring ethical model of business activity.

Schröter’s firm exemplifies what Heinrich Riehl referred to as ‘das ganze Haus’ (the whole house), a building that encompasses both the firm’s offices and the living quarters for
Schröter’s family (as cited in Purdy, 2014: 30). While located under the same roof, the values surrounding work and home are articulated through a series of public and private dichotomies: work/leisure, acquisition/consumption, rationality/emotion and production/reproduction. Congruent with these oppositions, gender roles are held to have evolved in accordance with physiological difference. Women are characterised by emotion, sensibility, and intuition, and are therefore naturally aligned with the domestic interior. While men are seen to be more rational, wilful, and capable of abstract judgment, making them more suited for life in the public sphere. Together they form a complimentary whole, the rational and affective nucleus of bourgeois society.

As mistress of the house, Sabine Schröter is a paragon of bourgeois virtue. Freytag approvingly depicts her tireless devotion to domestic duties and her sentimental attachment to the contents of the house. The governing ethos is puritanical in its association of cleanliness and order with personal virtue and respectability. The home has an additional function as the principal site of tradition and sentiment that functions as a counterbalance to the rational and progressive tendencies of the public sphere. Whenever Freytag depicts the domestic interior, its importance is established through the combination of rich detail and emotional effect:

Sabine was in her treasure-chamber. Along its walls stood great oaken presses, richly carved; in the middle, a table with twisted legs, and a few old-fashioned chairs around. On the shelves of the presses appeared piles of linen, and rows of glass, china, and plate, collected by the taste of more than three generations. The air was fragrant with old lavender and recent eau de Cologne. Here Sabine reigned supreme.

(Freytag, 1858: 66)

If Sabine is the heart of the house, her brother Traugott is its head. He is the prototypical patriarch, ‘wise honest and good, yet when appropriate distant and stern’ (Holub, 1991: 180). Throughout the novel he elicits an almost religious reverence and respect from his employees, befitting his first name ‘Traugott, literarily Godtrust’ (Holub, 1991: 180). Under Schröter’s guiding hand, the firm is both hierarchical and corporative. From the book-keeper, cashier and head clerk at the top of the chain of command to the clerks, apprentices, and warehouse porters below, there is recognition of being a ‘small vassal of a great body corporate, containing a variety of grades and functions’ (Freytag, 1858: 60). The tenor and ethic of working life is established by Schröter’s example. Cautious but decisive, methodical and unfailingly morally upright, his entire life is lived in service to business and family.
Instructing Wohlfart on the merchant’s vocation he acknowledges that it is a sober existence built upon ordered, regular, and repeated tasks, and cautions, ‘your life will, in time, appear a monotonous one… Ours is a rigidly regular house, where you have much work to look forward to, and little recreation’ (1858: 51).

The repetitious and monotone nature of merchant life is cynically derided by Fink who maintains that in a German firm, ‘You are one of the wheels in the machine and will be expected to grind regularly… you’ll soon see, my poor lad, what a gulf is fixed between the head of the firm and those who write his letters’ (Freytag, 1858: 52). In contrast to Fink’s position, the work ethic is legitimated through competence in one’s allotted tasks, a recognition of being an integral part of the operation of the firm and the affective attachment that springs from patriarchal relations. At the celebration of the anniversary of Schröter’s entrance to the firm, Fink, now thoroughly initiated into the practice of the firm, toasts ‘to the prosperity of a German house where work is a pleasure, and honour has its home. Hurrah for our counting-house and our principal!’ (1858: 142). Work finds its initial legitimation for Freytag as the basis of collective activity and identity. Through work, individuals are initiated into the economic order of the firm and then, by extension, the wider economic order of the nation.

The ideological basis of the Bürgertum’s work ethic is encapsulated in Schröter’s view of the course of human history:

Originally individuals were free, and, in the main, equal; then came the semi-barbarism of the privileged idler and the laboring bondsman. It is only since the growth of our large towns that the world boasts civilized states—only since then is the problem solved which proves that free labor alone makes national life noble, secure, and permanent.

(Freytag: 1858: 173; my italics)

In Schröter’s bourgeois worldview, history is conceived of as the progressive alienation of humanity from the autonomous productivity that is its essence. It is only with the emergence of the bourgeoisie, and its recognition of the value of ‘free labour’ that the errors of history have been corrected. ‘Free labour’ alone constitutes the natural and correct mode of existence. In its work ethic, the bourgeoisie provides a projection of human interest that is beyond the subjectivity of class, religion or nation. In establishing work as the basis of the
human condition, ‘bourgeois ideology projects its self-understanding as the fundamental ontology of all things’ (Berman, 1986: 81). Built upon this ideology, capitalism is a codified articulation of the natural order.

If ‘free labour’ represents the fundamental reality of the human condition, it is in the capitalist realm of commodity exchange that it finds utility and its social and ethical legitimation. In The Communist Manifesto (1848), Marx decries ‘the bourgeois’ has ‘pitilessly torn asunder’ all idyllic social ties leaving ‘no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest’ (Marx, 2002: 13). Against this corrosive image of the capitalist economy, Freytag identifies commodity exchange as the life blood of society. By establishing interdependence between individuals, it is the broker of personal relations and the formative power behind all progressive social institutions. As a trading firm, Schröter’s business lies at the nexus of exchange and is therefore a microcosmic exemplar of the positive effects of the entire economic order. This positive esteem for mercantile life is captured in Wohlfart’s defence of his vocation:

We live amid a many-colored web of countless threads, stretching across land and sea, and connecting man with man. When I place a sack of coffee in the scales, I am weaving an invisible link between the colonist’s daughter in Brazil, who has plucked the beans, and the young mechanic who drinks it for his breakfast; and if I take up a stick of cinnamon, I seem to see, on the one side, the Malay who has rolled it up, and, on the other, the old woman of our suburb who grates it over her pudding.

(Freytag, 1858: 125).

In addition to fostering a network of interrelationships, a solid bürgerlich basis to economic life is essential to the development of civilisation. In the most adventurous scenes of the novel, the action shifts to the Polish frontier. ‘That word of terror, “Revolution”’ had engulfed Poland, threatening the ordered stability of the business world. ‘Hundreds of ties, woven out of mutual interest, and having endured for years, were snapped at once. Each individual existence became more insecure, isolated and poor’ (Freytag, 1858: 167). In a plot development verging on dramatic hyperbole, Freytag has Schröter and Wohlfart head to Poland to protect the firm’s interests. In stark contrast to the order and stability of German life, Poland is an anarchic and economically backward land. Society, where it exists, is the remnant of a decaying Feudal order. Sections of the thoroughly decadent aristocracy, their estates in disrepair, maraud through a desolate countryside. Without direction, the peasantry
have become slothful and reprobate. Amidst the chaos, German settlements, where they remain unmolested, are the sole bastions of civilisation.

The disorder in Poland is the consequence of the absence of a middle class. In his indictment of Polish life, Schröter maintains that ‘the honourable burgher-class feeling has no root here… and its citizens have hardly any of those qualities which with us characterize commercial men—the first class in the state’ (Freytag, 1858: 173). As a consequence, ‘there is no race so little qualified to make progress, and gain civilisation and culture in exchange for capital as the Slavonic’ (1858: 173). Throughout the Polish episode there is recurrent reference to rotting buildings and filthy streets through which unkept men stagger to ‘long sittings in drinking houses’ (1858: 210). In Puritan fashion, Freytag attributes the squalor of Polish life to moral failing. The Poles lack the ethical propriety that underlies honest and productive participation in the economic order. Economic life, where it is to be found in Poland, is as disorderly, unethical, and laconic as the rest of society. When business is conducted, there is the recurrent sense of irregularity and uncertainty. On several occasions Wohlfart is left with ‘an impression of having being “done”’ in this ‘strange commercial drama’ (1858: 208).

Against this backdrop of Polish stagnation and economic incompetence, Germany’s role in Eastern Europe comes into focus. By correlating all that is progressive in Poland with German industry, Freytag establishes an association between bürgerlich virtues, civilisation and German imperialism. Wohlfart’s legitimation of Germany’s civilising role in Poland is an exemplary articulation of nineteenth century imperialist thought and as such is worth quoting in full:

I stand here now as one of the conquerors who, in the behalf of free labour and civilization, have usurped the dominion of the country from a weaker race. There is an old warfare between us and the Slavonic tribes; and we feel with pride that culture, industry, and credit are on our side. Whatever the Polish proprietors around us may now be—and there are many rich and intelligent men among them—every dollar that they can spend, they have made, directly or indirectly, by German intelligence. Their wild flocks are improved by our breeds; we erect the machinery that fills their spirit-casks; the acceptance their promissory notes and lands have hitherto obtained rests upon German credit and German confidence. The very arms they use against us are made in our factories or sold by our firms. It is not by a cunning policy, but peacefully through our own industry, that we have won our real empire
over this country, and, therefore, he who stands here as one of the conquering nation, plays a coward's part if he forsakes his post at the present time.

(Freytag, 1858: 400)

As Larry Ping suggests, Freytag sees the proper relationship to work and the economy as a pre-eminently German phenomenon. Through colonisation, Poland will acquire the stability and economic vigour requisite for its development. These colonists, through their industry, will fashion a new nation in the German image: ‘their weapons will not be rifles but plowshares and letters of credit’ (Ping, 2006: 103). Ideologically, imperialism finds its legitimation in the German work ethic and the growth in civilisation and prosperity that are its natural corollaries. For the Bürgertum, German imperialism is both a celebration and verification of its virtues writ large as the essential characteristics of civilisation.

Throughout Debit and Credit, the bürgerlich ideal-type is brought into further relief through contrast with three negative types: The Aristocrat, the American and the Jew. Each of these types functions as a threat and temptation to be resisted by the solid German citizen. For Freytag, the aristocrat is the lure of luxury and aesthetic refinement, the American the promise of freedom and adventure, and the Jew the unbridled pursuit of mammon.

**Aristocratic Privilege and Waste**

In contrast to the forward looking progressiveness of the Bürgertum, aristocratic life is based on a sense of permanence and tradition. Its authority depends upon the social differentiation established through the demonstration of historical superiority. The key symbols here are the hereditary title, castle, and the drawbridge. Collectively, they function as omnipresent reminders of historical pedigree, authority, and exclusivity (Riehl, 1990: 200). Contempt for work and esteem for the life of leisure and conspicuous consumption are also pivotal aspects of aristocratic distinction. Socially, this is expressed in ostentatious, highly ritualised, and time consuming activities that evince freedom from economic necessity. In the economic sphere, the aristocratic ideal leads to a derision of the nouveau riche and a positive evaluation of inherited wealth over personal achievement. Indentured to tradition and geared to the preservation of inherited wealth and privilege, the aristocratic worldview is typically nostalgic, self-interested and backwards looking.
It is as a ‘descendent of an ancient and honourable house’ that the reader is introduced to the Baron von Rothsattel, ‘the very model of a landed proprietor’ (Freytag, 1858: 33). At the beginning of the novel, Rothsattel is the solvent owner of a prosperous hereditary estate. His troubles begin when the estate can no longer provide the income required for the maintenance of his accustomed social position (1858: 56). Typical of his class, he remains hopelessly addicted to luxury despite mounting debts. While he acknowledges, ‘at the present time, money is beginning to replace our former privileges’, he maintains an aristocratic prejudice towards the commonness of business life (1858.148). As his debts spiral out of control, Rothsattel is seduced by the lure of quick profits and establishes a beet-sugar factory on the estate. The results are disastrous: as the factory fails, he finds himself increasingly at the mercy of Jewish usurers who mercilessly drive him on into insolvency. In contrast to the socially beneficial work of the middle class, Freytag sees aristocratic economic participation as the naively opportunistic and self-interested attempt to maintain outmoded privileges. For Freytag, Rothsattel foreshadows the logical fate of the Prussian aristocracy. Possessed of a delusional sense of self-entitlement, they are unable to come to terms with their declining fortunes and are destined for economic and social obsolescence.

The middle-class attitude towards the aristocracy is encapsulated in Schröter’s response to the demise of Rothsattel. Encouraged by Wohlfart to intervene in his situation, Schröter refuses along social Darwinist lines:

Where energy dies in families or individuals, then it is well that their means die too, that their money should circulate through other hands, and their plowshare pass to those who can guide it better. A family that has become effete through luxury ought to sink down into common life, to make room for the uprising of fresh energies and faculties.

(Freytag, 1858: 291)

For the young and idealistic Wohlfart, this position is initially understood as ‘so cold, so inexorable’ (Freytag, 1858: 292). Against this sentimentality, Schröter sees Rothsattel’s insolvency, not as a personal tragedy, but as a symptom of the wider decadence of the aristocracy. The Baron’s demise is a consequence of his incapacity to effectively administer his own concerns. He lacks ‘what alone ennobles the life of any man—good sense, and the power of steady exertion’ (1858: 290). In Schröter’s laissez-faire ideology, the aristocracy is a parasitic class that makes no positive economic contribution to society. Schröter rejects a
lifestyle that is founded on a negative appraisal of honest work, inherited wealth and a historical sense of self-entitlement. It is these negative qualities, he suggests, that have led the aristocracy into the hands of the Jewish usurers.

Against inherited wealth and privilege, the middle class posits a correspondence between moral virtue, industry, wealth, and social utility. This image of honest work as the underlying principle of both individual integrity and the social order is presented at the end of the novel: ‘Neither wealth nor position have any value for the individual or the community without the healthy energy which keeps the dead metal in life-producing action’ (Freytag, 1858: 568). As the life blood of society, money is ethically neutral, of value only to the extent that it is directed towards socially useful production and exchange. To artificially support the aristocracy is to maintain a spurious class that ‘seeks, at the cost of free activity for others, to preserve permanent possessions and privilege’ (1858: 291). In middle-class ideology, aristocratic self-interest operates against the ‘life-producing action’ of wealth and is therefore a ‘sin against the fundamental law of our social being’ (1858: 291). The harshness of this position is tempered by the civilising mission and community-centric ethos that informs the German work ethic. This is not the ideological legitimation of the Robber Barron but rather an expression of the overarching reality for a class that fervently believes in the truth, sanctity, and universal applicability of its core values. Schröter will unsympathetically eulogise the aristocracy, but he will not be its executioner. This role will be left to natural laws of the market and those more unscrupulous and un-German elements of society.

Following from the middle-class understanding of the economy as the basis of social life, Freytag extends his critique to the realm of culture. According to Pierre Bourdieu, cultural distinction is expressed through ease and naturalness. While this distinction can be developed by way of education, the sense of effortlessness and inherent taste is most pronounced when acquired through early upbringing (Bourdieu, 1984). Thomas Veblen suggests that true enculturation requires distance from a life of economic necessity: ‘cultivation of the aesthetic faculty requires time and application, and the demands made upon the gentleman in this direction therefore tend to change his life of leisure into a more or less arduous application to the business of learning how to live a life of ostensible leisure in a becoming way’ (Veblen, 1979: 75). It is here that the middle class is most self-conscious, awkward, and insecure. Throughout the nineteenth century, middle-class culture was the recurrent subject of romantic and aristocratic scorn. The charge of Spießbürger or philistine reflected the belief that the
prosaic, utilitarian, and ordered world of the middle class was antithetical to the development of personality and aesthetic refinement. Middle-class life was criticised as too one-sided and prone to the production of narrow-mindedness and mediocrity of the spirit.9

Freytag deals with middle-class cultural anxiety through Wohlfart’s maturation from a sense of social inferiority to his recognition of the superficiality of aristocratic culture. The contrast between aristocratic and middle-class culture is established early in the novel through Wohlfart’s relationship with Fink. From an aristocratic background, Fink embodies the classical ideal of Bildung as the full and unfettered development of personality. He is well read, travelled, an accomplished horseman and hunter, and thoroughly at home in the nuanced and highly stylised world of “good society”. In contrast, Wohlfart self-depreciatingly claims he has no appreciable talents beyond his ‘habits of industry and order,’ and capacity for honour and friendship (Freytag, 1858: 52 & 69). At Fink’s behest, Wohlfart is encouraged to expand his limited social horizons by taking dancing lessons. The lessons are organised by the Frau von Baldereck—‘one of the main supports of the very best of society’—for the aristocracy, military officers and a few of the town’s highest officials (1858: 92). With biting irony, Freytag paints these lessons as a frivolous and superficial form of social distinction:

It was difficult to say what had given this lady her social importance, for she was neither very well connected, nor very rich, nor very elegant, nor very intellectual… She had a very large acquaintance, was rigidly conventional, valued every one according to a social standard, and, therefore, her estimate was always attended to.

(Freytag, 1858: 92)

9 The romantic idea of the philistine is encapsulated in Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff’s King of the Philistines (1824):

I have completed the day's work to the satisfaction of my superiors; the President himself patted me on the shoulder and said: 'If you keep this up, young man, you will become a useful citizen one day’… How I thank my God that I have not turned out like so many of my former schoolfellows! That one over there for instance, who, surrounded by all this goodly company, sits on his own reading a book and has nothing but poems in his head. Oh, I don't mind either, after I have done my day's work, taking down a good classical poet for relaxation, or putting together a nice verse on the occasion of a superior's birthday or wedding, but — give me a solid job and a secure living.

(Eichendorff as cited in Brill, 1977: 85)
Through rumours orchestrated by Fink, Wohlfart is unwittingly introduced as a man of independent means with a mysterious royal connection. This distinction is immediately apparent to the cultivated eye of Frau von Baldereck who finds ‘there is a nobility and natural grace in everything the stranger does that is perfectly enchanting’ (Freytag, 1858: 95). For Freytag, aristocratic distinction is an illusion sustained by distance but lacking any inherent substance. In contrast to the meritocracy of middle-class culture which is founded upon the personal qualities of individuals, aristocratic culture evaluates through appearance and superficial distinctions ‘according to a social standard.’

On an individual level, aristocratic culture is similarly found wanting. As Wohlfart becomes more familiar with the Rothsattels, he begins to see through their ‘polished tone’ and ‘graceful social forms’ (Freytag, 1858: 338). He is astonished by their general ignorance of politics, history and geography. In contrast to his own practical inquisitiveness, the Rothsattels have a preference for the romantic novels of Chateaubriand. Aristocratic culture, like Romanticism, is self-indulgent, inwards looking and lacks practical attachment to the outside world. Wohlfart is amazed at the Rothsattels distance from modern life and their capacity to ‘measure all things by the scale of their own class interest’ (1858: 338). For Freytag, the classical ideal of Bildung exemplified in Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship (1795) is rejected as incongruous with the demands of the modern world. In distinction to the classical model, Freytag offers the circumscribed business world as the ideal educational environment. It is only through vocational specialisation, and the knowledge that comes from participation in the wider economic order, that individuals acquire the sense of focus and practical experience that elevates them beyond dilettantism and self-interest, and makes them productive members of society.

Despite this antediluvian portrait, Freytag suggests that the aristocracy retains a vital social role. In Poland, Wohlfart is rebuked by Schröter for brandishing loaded pistols: ‘It is better to confine ourselves to our accustomed weapons: we are men of peace’ (Freytag, 1858: 173). In contrast, the despondent Rothsattel is brought back to life in the defence of German settlements. Ultimately, his economic failings are redeemed by his defence of German imperial interests. The Polish episode highlights the Prussian Bürgertum’s deference to military authority that was to continue to grow after German unification. This acquiescence was to become a pivotal aspect of late nineteenth century German identity as captured in the novels of Theodore Fontane and Heinrich Mann’s image of der Untertan (subordinate or
underling). Freytag delineates correct spheres of action for both the Bürgertum and the aristocracy. Aristocratic involvement in business life is as ill-advised as the Bürgertum’s attempts to engage the weapons of war. In Freytag’s imperialist ideology, the moral idealism of the Bürgertum is ultimately supported by aristocratic might. Through the maintenance of their respective roles both classes will contribute to the realisation of the German nation.

**Yankee Capitalism**

In America, Sombart declared, ‘since all are seeking success… everyone is forced into a struggle to beat every other individual and a steeple-chase begins’ (as cited in Lipset, 1979: 114). Using a similar analogy, Weber argued that ‘the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning… gives it the character of sport’ (Weber, 2001:132). Unfettered by history and tradition, America is depicted as a land in the restless throws of becoming. This fluidity breeds the sense of excitement exemplified in Fink’s life course from the stock exchange, to agriculturalist, to the taming of the wild frontier. As Fink remarks, ‘on the other side of the Atlantic we measure things by a very different scale to that used in this corner of Germany’ (Freytag, 1858: 92). America for the German mind was a land of personal invention where anything was possible. The attraction of the American lifestyle is embodied in Wohlfart’s youthful infatuation with Fennimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). For German readers throughout the nineteenth century, Cooper’s evocative tales of American life served as escapist complement to the prosaic stability of their own lives.  

As an exemplar of American life, Fink embodies its restless spirit, hyper-individualism and futurological outlook. In contrast to the German, the American remains free from the sentimentality that proceeds from a sense of tradition. Lacking the attachment to people, places and objects that is a hallmark of Sombart’s early capitalism, ‘the only relationship between the Yankee and his environment is one of practical usefulness’ (Sombart, 1967:

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10 Cooper’s novels were extremely popular in Germany from the 1820s onwards. As Willard Thorpe suggests, ‘to those who were leaving Germany Cooper’s novels provided the picture of America which they wanted. For those who remained behind, Cooper offered consolation and escape’ (Thorp, 1954: 533).
The American sees things in purely financial terms, as Fink maintains, ‘what he has is worth its equivalent in dollars and no more’ (Freytag, 1858: 138). It is this ruthless lack of sentimentality and emphasis on pure utility that Fink proclaims has ‘created a free and powerful state’ (1858: 138). In contrast, the Germans are fettered by ‘a thousand obsolete customs’ spun into ‘a web of sentimentalism’ (1858: 138). For Fink, this sentimentalism is preventing Germany from becoming a dominant economic force: ‘If America had been peopled by Germans’ Fink maintains, ‘they would still be drinking chicory instead of coffee, at whatever rate of duty the paternal governments of Europe liked to impose’ (1858: 138).

In Freytag’s critique, the American way of life leads to ‘an egoism to which everything is sacrificed’ (Freytag, 1858: 138). To reduce the world to its equivalence in dollars is to divorce the purpose of work from its governing ideology. It is sentimentality which binds the German merchant to greater concerns than pure pecuniary interest. In Schröter’s firm, one ‘can neither become a rich man, nor have any experience of life on a large and exciting scale’ (1858: 161). However, through an allegiance to a firm, community, and nation, work maintains a gravity and purpose beyond American sport. Against the American race for riches, this sense of sharing in the fate of a greater order lies at the heart of Freytag’s vision:

We … are working members of a business that does not belong to us, and each of us looks upon his occupation from the German point of view … None of us reasons, ‘The firm pays me so many dollars, consequently the firm is worth so many dollars to me.’ No; when the house prospers we are all pleased and proud; if it loses, we regret it perhaps more than the principal does.

(Freytag, 1858: 130)

In contrast to its American mode, German work remains its own reward. The German work ethic is centrifugal, extending outwards from a sign of personal virtue to embrace the firm and then the nation. For Freytag, German sentimentality is an expression of loyalty, tradition, and social conscience. Against the restless spirit of American capitalism, he points to the affective warmth and communal ethos that underlies German life. As Georg Kren suggests, Freytag fetishises the home, firm and middle-class contentment and stability. He maintains that ‘business and sentiment… each in their proper sphere offer complete fulfilment to the individual’ (Kren, 1963: 489).

**Jewish Pariah Capitalism**
Throughout the nineteenth century, the role of Jews in the German economy was the subject of wide and heated debate. In one estimate, 2,500 works were published in Germany between 1815 and 1850 on the Jewish question (Muller, 2003: 181). While opinions varied, the dominant attitude towards the Jews was informed by established stereotype and prejudice. Since early Christianity, Jews had been associated with money lending, a position that was reinforced throughout the Reformation and the Enlightenment. As Hannah Arendt suggests, in the European arts, the Jew was ‘the father of every notorious swindler and mountebank’ (Arendt, 2007: 69). In German economic thought, from Marx to Sombart, Jewish character is treated as almost synonymous with the spirit of high capitalism. ‘What is the basis of Jewdom?’ Marx asks, ‘practical need and self-interest. What is the worldly cult of the Jew? Bargaining. What is his worldly god? Money’ (Marx, 1984: 236). For Marx, Jewish character was so entwined with exploitative aspects of capitalism that ‘the social emancipation of the Jews is the emancipation of society from Judaism’ (1984: 241). For Sombart, the Jews embodied everything that was supranational, rootless and abstract in high capitalism in contrast to the corporative ethos, traditionalism and tangible utility that typified German commercial life. Perennial strangers wherever they lived, the Jews were seen to employ contrasting principles in their dealings with outsiders and amongst themselves. Commercially, they were castigated for their divergence from traditional business practices and ethical indifference to the means used to procure wealth (Sombart, 1951).

This image of the Jew, as rootless and morally suspect, lay at the heart of nineteenth century German anti-Semitism. It was an image that gained force through the second half of the nineteenth century. By the 1870s the Jew had become ‘the perfect symbol of the disturbingly modern’ (Blackbourn, 1997: 308). Jews were increasingly associated with a Manchester School economic ethos, materialism, and speculative and morally irresponsible business practice (Blackbourn, 1997: 308). By the turn of the twentieth century the casual role of Jews in the ills of capitalism had reached its apotheosis in the image of the Jew as ‘international banker’ (Mosse, 1957: 221).

As a consequence of its unapologetic nationalism and celebration of German particularity, *Debit and Credit* played a central role in nineteenth century German anti-Semitism. As Eda Sagarra suggests, ‘Freytag not only exercised a formative influence on the evolution of anti-Semitic attitudes amongst his fellow countrymen, but was also widely representative of
‘middle-class liberal’ opinions on these and other matters between the Revolution of 1848 and the founding of the Second Empire’ (Sagarra, 1985: 160). Against claims of anti-Semitism, Freytag maintained that his depiction of the Jews was informed by his own life experiences. Living in Breslau, close to the Polish border, he wrote of his firsthand experience of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe.

The foreign Jew left his heart at home with his family… He wants nothing more than to speculate and not just about large sums of money, over a few pennies his imagination broods for days running. His legs are tireless from morning until evening. The virtue which ennobles the solid businessman his selfless, commercial honour, he does not know, but he takes the semblance of security and reliability… until it pays to do something questionable, what according to our ideas is quite questionable [for him] is only a daring strike.

(Freytag, 1903: 341-342; my translation)

In *Debit and Credit*, Freytag’s portrait of the Jews extends from recent Eastern European immigrants to more assimilated Jewish businessmen. In alignment with his critique of Poland, the recent immigrants are depicted as primitive and uncultured. They are the minor peddlers that live on the fringes of German economic life. Whilst commercially dishonest and completely in thrall to mammon, Freytag depicts them in an inconsequential light. It is when their dishonesty and obsession with wealth is carried through to larger commercial practices that they threaten the stability of the wider German economic order.

The critique of Jewish capitalism is established through the contrasting career paths of the virtuous Anton Wohlfart and the *bête noir* of the German commercial life, the unscrupulous Veitel Itzig. As the novel progresses, this contrast develops into a typology of German and Jewish modes of business practice. When Itzig arrives in Breslau, he finds employment with the Jewish usurer Ehrenthal. In contrast to the principled cordiality of Schröter’s firm, Ehrenthal’s house is a hive of dubious transactions and naked self-interest. In pursuit of wealth, Freytag depicts the Jews as willing to commit any moral and ethical transgression. Jewish ruthless self-interest is established early in the novel through Itzig’s insistence that ‘when a man is not disposed to sell, he must be forced to sell’ (Freytag, 1858: 32). Throughout the novel this force is shown to be anything from deception and theft to blackmail. The epitome of the Jewish type, Itzig’s entire existence is directed towards the pursuit of money:
He had the faculty of never getting tired, was all day on his feet, would run any length for a few pence, and never resented a harsh word. He allowed himself no other recreation than that of counting over his different transactions and their probable results.

(Freytag, 1858: 72)

In contrast to the regular rhythm of German working life, Jewish work is typified by an almost hysterical restlessness. Commerce is seen as a struggle of all against all necessitating that each moment be viewed with a calculating and exploitative eye. Lacking the German qualities of decorum, honesty and social responsibility, Jewish work is depicted as having no goal beyond self-interest and a shallow materialism. For Freytag, this complete lack of scruple and desire for instant material gratification finds its natural outlet in usury and speculation.

In contrast to Wohlfart’s apprenticeship, Itzig has little interest in trade and its civilising ideology. His education consists of learning about promissory notes and the grey areas of the law which will initiate him into the secrets of commercial life. Jewish commercial life, Freytag maintains, utilises and abides by the law only insofar as it accords with self-interest. Once familiar with the law, Itzig embarks upon a highly profitable career built upon the purchase of mortgages and money lending at extortionate rates of interest. After his first shady dealing, the ethical gulf that lies between these activities and the German merchants is established: ‘The speculation was one of the most beautiful that a man of Itzig’s principles could undertake’ (Freytag, 1858: 117). As the novel progresses, Ehrenthal and Itzig’s insatiable greed fixates on coaxing Rothsattel to continue to borrow against his estate. As Ehrenthal explains to the Barron, ‘not so rich… you may then be so any moment you like; any one, with a property like yours, can double his capital in ten years, without the slightest risk’ (1858: 37). Where bürgerlich sentiment allows for the appreciation of the history and beauty of the Rothsattel estate, the usurers see only static capital. Ultimately, their goal is to drive Rothsattel into insolvency and thereby procure his estate. In alignment with Sombart’s Jewish type, Freytag’s usurers are unethical, excessively acquisitive and display a capacity for rational abstraction coupled with a ruthless lack of sentimentality. This is typified in Ehrenthal relationship to Rothsattel:

The lord had been for a long time the object of his preoccupation, of his work, of his jealous watchfulness. He had become for the scoundrel what his field are to the farmer, what her pet is to the housewife.
Usury is ultimately parasitic, an unethical profiteering at the expense of others. Lacking any participation in production or commodity exchange it is the quintessential economic expression of self-interest.

In contrast to the Jews, the German merchants maintain the classical Christian antipathy to usury. As a form of profit that is independent of tangible work, usury is the antithesis of the Protestant association of honest work, virtue, and fair reward. While in Schröter’s firm, economic activity is built upon interpersonal conduct and the exchange of palpable goods, usury establishes a purely paper economy. In outlining the decline of the Rothsattels, Freytag emphasises the ethical ambiguity that arises through economic abstraction. As the trail of paper money becomes increasingly diffuse, the Baron is unaware of exactly what ventures he is involved in. Through the deception of the Jewish usurers, he is complicit in the fraudulent activity of a bankrupt wood dealer. Freytag makes it clear that the only ethically safe course is to maintain constant vigilance and personal involvement the governance of one’s affairs.

While Freytag’s Jewish usurers evoke Shylock’s macabre pursuit of his pound of flesh, this image is somewhat attenuated by the one positive Jewish character in the novel, the intellectual Bernhard. The son of the usurer Ehrenthal, Bernhard is a thoroughly assimilated and therefore honest and upright member of society. In depicting Bernhard’s exclusion from a university career due to his Jewish background, Freytag comes closest to an acknowledgement of the role of social and economic marginalisation in Jewish business practices. In contrast to the biologically based anti-Semitism of the latter half of the nineteenth century, Freytag emphasised that the negative Jewish qualities were not immutable. His critique shares the didactic aims of Marx’s stigmatisation of the Jews. By propagating the exiting stereotype and antipathy, Jewishness serves as a warning against the potential for naked self-interest that accompanies capitalist development. In the process, the Jew absorbs the deleterious aspects of capitalism, leaving the virtuous German Bürger un tarnished. For Freytag’s audience, the Jew was to be a rhetorical foil, leading to the inevitable conclusion that it was only through the maintenance of the solid commercial ethics

11 For an outline of the history of Christian hostility to usury see Muller (2002: 5-13).
of the German Bürgertum that their right to the moral and economic leaderships of the nation would be assured.

In alignment with the German imperial role in Poland, Freytag believed that the Jewish problem could be solved through assimilation. Only through the adoption of bürgerlich values would the Jews move beyond social marginalisation and destructive egoism to become valuable members of society. Without adapting these values, they remained ‘the sick party of our people’ and must be kept from infecting the healthy (Freytag as cited in Mosse, 1957: 224). Freytag’s position here shares in the general 1850s liberal rejection of a pluralistic society. ‘Emancipation’ for the liberals ‘was not so much a rightful condition of all Jews, but rather a kind of prize to be gained by assimilated Jews’ (Sagarra, 1987: 165). The influence of Freytag’s novel in this drive towards assimilation is evident in Jewish response to the text. By the late nineteenth century, it had become a popular Bar Mitzvah gift, a testament to assimilated Jews identification with Freytag’s national-liberal vision (Sagarra, 1987: 172).

**Debit and Credit as Middle-Class Ideal**

The Bürgertum in Debit and Credit embodies both traditional and progressive tendencies. As such it straddles the dichotomy that typifies late nineteenth and early twentieth century German social thought. From the romantic anti-capitalism of Ferdinand Tönnies Community and Society (1887) to Weber’s anglophilic The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1904-1905), German sociology counterpoised German traditionalism against progressive Western models. For Weber, Lutherans and Calvinists served as historical exemplars of contemporary German and Anglo-American difference. He maintained that in contrast to the rational autonomy that characterised the Puritans, the German notion of vocation was patterned by its conservative Lutheran heritage.\(^{12}\) Whereas the necessity for proof of salvation provided the motive for the restless toil for the Puritans, the Lutheran conception of salvation was based on sola fide (by faith alone) and conscientious application ‘within the limits imposed by his established station in life’ (Weber, 1992: 44). Consequently, there was

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\(^{12}\) Lutheranism remained the major religious denomination in Germany throughout the Imperial Empire. The attempt to expunge the influence of Catholicism in Bismarck’s Kulturkampf (1878-1890) further consolidated Prussian Protestant religious and cultural hegemony. In Imperial Germany, two-thirds of all Germans were Lutherans (Lowie, 1954: 102). While ascetic Protestantism particularly Pietism and Calvinism maintained a presence in Germany, its influence remained regionally specific and membership extremely small (Lowie, 1954: 102).
little motivation to break from accustomed modes of living and the Lutheran economic outlook remained essentially traditional.

The Lutheran ideal type of work was that of the Bürger soberly meeting the demands of the day. It is an image of vocation within an organic Gemeinschaft: affective warmth within the workplace, quiet industry and persistent application circumscribed by, and embedded in, existing mores. In the economic world, Calvinism fostered staunch individualism and the rise of the competitive businessman whereas ‘Lutheranism produced diligent Bürgers and bureaucrats each with fixed and limited areas of competence’ (Kahler, 1974: 240). Where the Puritan sought rational mastery of the world, the Lutheran image is one of abdication of the desire to tame what falls outside the dutiful performance of vocation.

Whilst the work ethic in Debit and Credit is indebted to its Lutheran past, it is thoroughly secularised. The only religious character in the novel is the clerk Bauman. His religious zeal is foreign to the rest of Schröter’s employees and a source of benign amusement. Bauman longs to follow another calling as a missionary in Africa. Throughout the novel his goal is continually postponed through a sense of loyalty to the firm. As with the political aspirations of the Bürgertum, personal religious goals are ultimately subsumed by duty to firm and nation. Freytag’s emphasis on duty reflects the general liberal turn towards Prussian nationalism in the 1850s. From its roots in the Lutheran respect for authority, a German intellectual tradition concerning the state runs from Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel to the Prussian historians Leopold Ranke and Heinrich von Treitschke. The state is envisaged as an autonomous supra-individual entity; the transcendent manifestation of national identity and source of all moral and cultural values. As Hans Kohn suggests, this national ideal that would shape the second Reich has a long history in Prussia:

Life in eighteenth century Prussia was dominated by a stern sense of duty and service, by frugality and cultural insensibility. The emphasis was on efficiency, self-reliance, and thrift, not, as in the middle-class world of puritanism, for the sake of the individual and of religion but for the sake of the authoritarian state and of military power. Its own historians praised the Prussian state as the personification of political power. The state became the fountainhead of ethical life and the centre of devotion.

(Kohn, 1960: 130)
For the Bürgertum, service to the nation was a secular compliment to fading religious imperatives. From the idea of vocation as private virtue and national service, emerged the conviction that Germany possessed a unique and superior relation to work compared to other nations (Campbell, 1989: 3). In Debit and Credit, the German ethic is articulated as much by its distance from other models as through its own self-conception. Against aristocratic indolence and Jewish and American self-interest, the Bürgertum remains grounded by its sense of tradition and service. In contrast to Weber’s static Lutheran type, Freytag’s Bürgertum reflect a moderately progressive economic attitude. Ideologically, Manchester principles are endorsed to the extent that they accord with its traditional corporative ethos and a sense of national duty. In alignment with its Lutheran origins, the notion of work continues to have an affiliation with the ideal of the craftsman. Tangible and practical activity is valued as real work and there is a deep suspicion over the new market tendencies towards speculation, typified by the Jewish and American types. There is also a patriarchal intimacy in the work relations that harkens back to the pre-industrial era. The employees of the firm are seen as members of the extended family and there is a duty of care reminiscent of feudal noblesse oblige. Finally, the overarching moral legitimation of business life is established by its wider import in the civilising process and German nationalism. Collectively, these elements serve to place a conservative stamp on economic life that acted as a bulwark against commercial activity based solely on pecuniary interest.

While the 1850s was a period of social mobility that produced a blossoming of bürgerlich culture, the results were short lived. The reality of late nineteenth century Germany was the emergence of cartels and a growth in bureaucratic and economic centralisation. In the process, the independent merchant ideal became increasingly anachronistic in a world governed by administrators and white collar employees. Culturally, by the end on the nineteenth century, the rigidity of the social structure led to the Bürgertum’s increasing adoption of Prussian aristocratic and militaristic values. Consequently, Freytag’s vision fails to deal with nascent socio-economic realities. In his portrait of German life, little attention is paid to the technological, industrial and urban transformation that would occupy later German thought. Indeed, the integrity of Freytag’s middle-class world is only maintained by projecting the disruptive aspects of capitalist development onto the demonised other of the American and the Jew. As a result, there is an anxious subtext to the narrative that avoids engagement with emergent conditions and instead continues to affirm what was already becoming an anachronistic way of life.
Ultimately, this conservative element of *Debit and Credit* reflects a general tendency of mid-nineteenth century German literature. Novelists of the period were predominantly from small rural towns that could still lay some claim to being idyllic *Gemeinschaften*. Prior to unification in 1871, Germany lacked an equivalence of the urban centres of England or France (Walker, 1971). As a consequence, mid-nineteenth century German realism has none of the gritty urbanism and social critique of Charles Dickens or Honoré de Balzac. It was not until near the end of the century, in novelists like Theodor Fontane, Heinrich Mann and Thomas Mann, that the deleterious consequences of German urbanisation and industrialisation began to find greater representation (Pascal, 1956). These concerns will be taken up in the following chapter.
Bourgeois Decadence

In search of bourgeois man? Is he not to be found everywhere? Is not the culture of the present (at least in the West), from economics right through to literature and music bourgeois?

(Lukács, 1945/1967: 13)

While less than fifty years lie between the publication of *Debit and Credit* (1855) and Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks* (1901), they are separated by a gulf in sensibility. Despite its nostalgic inflections and nascent class consciousness, *Debit and Credit* is a concentrated image of a life-form in the ascendant—all is confidence, anticipation and propriety under the auspices of benevolent necessity. If, however, Anton Wohlfart’s maturation towards social integration is an exemplary Bildungsroman, then Mann’s novel is its regressive antithesis. *Buddenbrooks* is permeated with nostalgia for a lost ideal and a sense of inexorable decay. Written at the turn of the century, it is an heir to fin de siècle pessimism over the prospects of bourgeois civilisation. Mann, the self-identifying latecomer, eulogises the Bürgertum as Freytag had the aristocracy.

In agreement with Freytag, Mann sees the Bürgertum as the primary agent in German cultural development from the second half of the nineteenth century (Mann, 1983: 82). While Freytag’s vision is constrained by historical specificity, Mann’s is more panoptic, extending through the turn of the century and the Two World Wars. As a result, he captures both the Bürgertum’s decline and the emergence of ensuing forms of the middle strata. His search for ‘bourgeois man’ is a search for this ever evolving citizen of the middle that takes place at pivotal moments in German history (Lukács, 1967:13). In *Buddenbrooks*, Mann depicts the Bürgertum confronting the amoral materialism of high capitalism, in *Death in Venice* (1912), the discipline and instinctual repression of Prussian life devolving into an orgiastic release of Eros, and in *The Magic Mountain* (1924), the moral and intellectual confusion of European

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1 See in particular, ‘The burgher is national in his essence; if he has been the bearer of the idea of German unity, it is because he has always been the bearer of German culture and way of thinking’ (Mann, 1983: 81-82).
bourgeoisie civilisation in the period leading up to the First World War. Finally, with *Doctor Faustus* (1947), the sense of alienation and spiritual bankruptcy that led to the rise of National Socialism is explored. The ‘search for bourgeois man’, then, is the Ariadne’s thread of his entire oeuvre. It is a focus that lends his work explicitly to sociological interpretation. For his own part Mann maintained:

> I place some value on the fact that I sensed and discovered the idea that the modern capitalist businessman, the bourgeois, with his ascetic idea of duty to his career, was the creation of the Protestant ethic, of Puritanism and Calvinism, that I came to this idea completely on my own… I only discovered afterwards, recently, that it had been thought and expressed at the same time by learned thinkers. Max Weber in Heidelberg, and after him Ernst Troeltsch… the thought is also found in greatly exaggerated form in Werner Sombart’s work of 1913, *The Bourgeoisie*—which interprets the capitalist entrepreneur as a synthesis of hero, merchant and burgher.

(Mann, 1983: 103-104)

The extent of Mann’s influence led Georg Lukács to suggest that there had been a ‘Buddenbrooking’ of social and cultural thought (1979: 25). For his own part, Mann suggested ‘the epoch-dominating experience’ of Nietzsche lay behind his generations’ moral and intellectual sensibility (Mann, 1983: 104). It was Nietzsche, not as the prophet of Dionysian *Lebensphilosophie* (philosophy of life), but Nietzsche the moralist, the ‘Godless Calvin’ who had uncovered the relationship between ascetic ideals and bourgeois modernity, that Mann and his contemporaries turned to for an understanding of the times (1983: 104). In his depiction of the decline of the Protestant character type, Mann interlocks with the emergent German sociological tradition as well giving expression to the wider public’s sense of living through a breach between traditional and modern life. It was this capacity to capture the *Zeitgeist*, that led Lukács to declare that Mann was ‘the last great bourgeois writer’ and ‘representative as a conscience of the German middle class’ (1979:12, 19). This resonance with the middle class is attested by *Buddenbrooks*’ popularity. Selling well from publication, it went on to be the bestselling German novel of the first half of the twentieth century

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2 The same thread continues through Mann’s mature essays in his critique of fascism and movement towards democracy and western humanism. While these works are of interest in the evolution of his thought, they are beyond the scope of the present study.

3 Mann is critical of the late nineteenth century’s reception of Nietzsche’s ideal of cultural renewal through the *Übermensch*. He believed that this fascination had led to an unbalanced celebration of the Dionysian, what he described as the ‘Hysterical Renaissance’ where the drunken ‘Cesare Borgia’ stands as a cultural exemplar (Mann, 1983: 399). For Mann, this interpretation of Nietzsche heralded the dominance of aesthetics over morality and instinct over reason. Like Weber, Mann rejects the utopian and dangerous overreaching he finds in this posture and instead remains committed to finding solutions within the bourgeois world.
An enduring classic, it has remained popular with critics and the public alike as evinced by a vast secondary literature and regular television and film adaptations.

Ideologically, *Buddenbrooks* reflects the fragmentation of the contemporary *Weltanschauung*. The poetic condensation and unitary vision that had typified Freytag and the poetic realists is superannuated by an internecine clash of causes: Naturalism’s emphasis on hereditary and environmental factors is coupled with the romantic concern with *Innerlichkeit* (inwardness) and Schopenhauerian and Nietzschean pessimistic metaphysics. For Mann, the modern world is too complex to be reduced to positivistic explanation. Following Nietzsche, he is critical of the Socratic optimism of the Enlightenment project, with its faith in reason’s capacity to understand and correct being. It is this hubris that has led to the shallow ameliorative and reformist policies of Western Civilisation (Mann, 1983). Mann rejects the Enlightenment worldview as superficial and posits irony over intellectual certainty, a conservative pessimism over progressive and reformist optimism, in depicting the human condition. The result is a commitment to life in its entirety: a portrayal in which the religious, scientific, political, economic, psychological and existential are interpenetrated. Through the capture of this heterogeneous totality, *Buddenbrooks* provides a snapshot of late bourgeois culture before the sense of a complete break with tradition and retreat from the objective world that pervades modernism and its derivatives.

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4 Mann shares in what H. Stuart Hughes has referred to as the ‘revolt against positivism’ that took place in European thought from the 1890s (Hughes, 1979: 33-66). Social thought of the time ‘challenged the scientific monism of the Spencerian and Comtean tradition but also broke the equation linking nature, reason, morality and progress that characterised the classic liberal view of the market’ (Brick, 1986: 37).

5 Against the polemical reductionism and politicisation of art he saw in ‘civilisations literary men’ those reformists with their shallow faith in reason, progress and universal rights and values, Mann believed ‘He [the German] will never agree that society is the same thing as ‘life’, never rank the problems of society above the moral, the inner experience. We are not a social nation, nor a mine of information for idle psychologists to pick up. The social life glorified by the Enlightenment is and remains the sphere of indigence, compromise and irresolvable antinomies’ (Mann, 1983: 39).

6 Mann saw his novel as ‘perhaps the first and only Naturalist novel in Germany’ (1983: 89). This is a strained understanding of his work. It is the emphasis on hereditary factors in accounting for the Buddenbrooks’ decline that seems most crude and antiquated to a modern sensibility. The ‘naturalism’ of the text is suggestive of Max Nordeau’s *Degeneration* (1892) and the late nineteenth century exponents of hereditary determinism like Henrik Ibsen that heavily influenced Mann in his youth. While the novel moves beyond a merely naturalistic account through its treatment of speculative philosophy it remains more attached to its milieu than the works of modernists like Franz Kafka or Robert Musil. As Lukács suggests in his essay *Franz Kafka or Thomas Mann*, like the modernists, Mann deals with ‘angst, nausea, a sense of isolation, and despair’ but he differs in his tying of these conditions to a concrete social and psychological reality in contrast to the modernists who take this condition as grounded in reality itself: ‘For all his fascination with the dark regions of modern existence, Thomas Mann always shows up distortion for what it is, tracing its roots and its concrete origins in society’ (Lukács 1963: 79).
Buddenbrooks is the tale of a patrician grain merchant family in the north German city of Lübeck. Unfolding between 1835-1875, the narrative is bifocal: the rise and fall of the Buddenbrooks family occurs against the backdrop of Germany’s rapid transition from a semi-feudal agrarian society to an industrialised nation state. In the process, rising levels of affluence are considered alongside the corrosive effects of modernisation. As the novel progresses, the expansion of modes of transport and communication, rising levels of social and geographical mobility, political centralisation and widening markets convey the final stages of the transition from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft. The complex tapestry of mores, beliefs and values that were established over generations is displaced within a single lifetime by increasingly impersonal relations, rational contracts and a cosmopolitan over parochial outlook. As the social fabric of this relatively static patrician town dissipates, life becomes faster, more competitive and impersonal. These more abstract relationships and diffuse sentiments no longer press upon the individuals with the same weight as traditional values. Following the late nineteenth century German sociological trope of modernity as loss, technological and economic ‘progress’ is counterpoised against its cultural and psychological costs.

The novel opens with eight year old Tony Buddenbrook stumbling over a Lutheran catechism. She asks, ‘What comes next?’ In a sense, the entire novel is engaged with the idea of ‘what comes next’: or how to live and for what purpose, in a secular late bourgeois world. Tony’s personal answer throughout her life reflects Mann’s pessimism surrounding the fate of his class. Her answer is an obstinate and increasingly delusional retreat into an antiquating tradition that by novel’s end is decadent and incongruous with the world outside. Through four generations, Buddenbrooks follows the unravelling of bürgerlich identity through its increasing inability to respond to Tony’s question. With each generation, confidence, moral propriety and the ability to successfully participate in the world is undermined by a growing sense of fatalism, meaninglessness and despair. In contrast to Freytag’s vision, the Buddenbrooks’ world is no longer experienced confidently as a product of human activity but increasingly as an obdurate and immutable social reality. For Mann, as it was for Weber, the spiritual and human values that had nurtured early capitalism have

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7 Tony’s ability to mechanically regurgitate the catechism once prompted by her elders portends her later role as the unthinking custodian of family tradition. As E. M. Wolf suggests, the opening scene also establishes that ‘we are entering upon an environment permeated by religion in the form of Lutheran Protestantism from the basic social unity of the nuclear family to the wider encompassing political entity’ (Wolf, 1989: 85).
receded, leaving individuals suspended between the bourgeois impulse towards meaningful action and the paucity of the world.

In constructing the novel, Mann started with the decadent latecomer and then traced his negative teleology from the halcyon days of the middle of the nineteenth century. In charting the ascent of the Bürgertum, Freytag had seen its development as largely shaped through antipathy to foreign forms of life. It was the alien values of the aristocrat, the American and the Jew that held the greatest threat. In tracing the Bürgertum’s decline, Mann sees its enemy as lying primarily within: the ironic consequence of the unfolding of its own internal logic. His characters are ideal-types, each motivated by a core value that is held within as a basic life posture. Developing from this kernel, their lives function as experimental matrixes through which the consequences of the values they embody are explored. The result is an analytical perspective that closely follows the cultural anthropology of Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morals (1887). Through four generations, Mann charts the cultural and psychological attributes that are promoted and made redundant under historical conditions. After tracing this process, the contemporary climate is evaluated through the personality types it engenders. In Buddenbrooks, Mann portrays the transition from unified bürgerlich culture to the fractured homogeneity of the late bourgeois world through six main types: the humanistic, the religious, the antiquarian, the ironic, the bourgeois and the decadent.

Mann laboriously collected material for the novel from his family’s biography to supplement his personal experience of Lübeckian life in his youth. Hanno ‘the sensitive latecomer’ was originally envisaged as a semi-autobiographical portrayal of Mann’s own childhood self. Mann drew heavily on correspondence with his uncle and family chronicles to flesh out the story. ‘In writing Buddenbrooks… with its topography and even more important its ethos—he also took full advantage of direct access to the city’s past, from its most general character and mood right down to its most minute detail, through the older members of his family’ (Reed, 1999: 387).

Mann’s concern with the fate of character types under the conditions of modernity has strong parallels with Weber’s concerns with the decline of the classic Protestant type and the emergence of the utilitarian and materialistic modern bourgeoisie. It is a concern that accords with what William Hennis has argued is the Nietzschean legacy in Max Weber’s construction of ideal-types. As Hennis suggests ‘the quality of the society is then only a means for the real question concerning the Typus Mensch promoted or suppressed by these means. What Weber expressed here corresponds to the core of Nietzsche’s thought: how can the ‘diminishment’ and progressive ‘mediocrity’ of men, the outcome of 2000 years of history and, according to Nietzsche, the result of Christianity and its succeeding idea, the ‘modern idea’ of democracy and Liberalism, be halted?’ (Hennis, 1988: 152).
The Bürgertum

In the opening scenes of Buddenbrooks, Mann outlines his bürgerlich ideal. The Buddenbrooks have just taken possession of a venerable townhouse—a symbol of the family’s rising fortunes—and are awaiting guests for the housewarming. The narrative pauses lovingly over minute details of the house. From the rigid permanence of the brick exterior and the interior’s pillared halls, to the ‘heavy resilient tapestries’ of idyllic pastoral scenes and tasteful minimalism of the classical furnishings, the entire house evokes a sense of style, stability and order (Mann, 1999: 5). In the landscape-room, three generations of the family await the celebration, relaxed in comfortable intimacy. They are the living embodiment of family history and promise for the future. The scene evokes typically Protestant patterns of socialisation. In an era of declining institutional authority, the family has become the primary carrier of bürgerlich identity and moral axis of the wider community. Business and social relations are founded upon the sense of trust and propriety that emanates from the solid respectability of the family home. As the guests arrive, the sense of order and continuity expands. The local priest, the town poet, a senator, brokers and members from other major patrician houses have all come to celebrate the Buddenbrooks’ success: the family it seems, are at the hub of Lübeck’s spiritual, cultural, political and economic life.

The ensuing dinner party consolidates this sense of comfort, stability and social import. Rich courses are served accompanied by vintage bottles of Malmsey, tales are told of the family’s history and speeches are made commemorating the occasion. It is a picture of luxurious contentment: ‘There they all sat on heavy, high-backed chairs, consuming good heavy food from good heavy silver plates, drinking full-bodied wines and expressing their views on all subjects’ (Mann, 1999: 21). Despite the collective bonhomie, subtle class gradations are apparent. The extremely wealthy Lebrecht Kröger, aristocratic in style and grace, has brought an extravagant gift and is gently admonished, ‘he has always been like that – very lordly, very free with his money, a real cavalier à-la-mode’ (1999: 10). At the other end of the social spectrum, Köppen, a wine merchant who has recently ‘become a man of means,’ struggles with the nuances of social performance (1999: 14). Speaking loudly and with awkward turns of phrase, his praise of the Buddenbrooks’ wealth and elegance is a little too effusive. After
the heavy meal, he is unsure whether to unbutton his waistcoat and whether to laugh at a lewd limerick shared amongst the men.\(^\text{10}\)

The opening scenes locate the Buddenbrooks amongst the upper middle-class. To be a ‘Buddenbrook’ is to possess a sense of tradition, social prestige and influence, a nodding acquaintance with the arts, refined manners, a love of comfort and a ‘studied ease’ in social performance (Mann, 1999: 11). Whilst having adopted outward symbols of success, it is a lifestyle that remains aligned to a pragmatic worldview. The Buddenbrooks continue to share with the wider Besitzbürgerum an appreciation of hard work and civic duty, love of order and an antipathy to shiftlessness and indolence. Consequently, their ethos reflects a maturation and refinement of the classic bürgerlich type once freed from the shackles of economic necessity. For the Buddenbrooks, Bürgerlichkeit is, at least ostensibly, as much a product of Bildung (education and culture) as it is of Besitz (property).

**The Humanist**

Presiding over the festivities is the patriarch of the family and firm, Johann Buddenbrook. In his youth, Johann consolidated the family fortune trading grain in the Napoleonic wars. Now in his seventies, he has the proud and confident bearing of a self-made man. He is a child of the Enlightenment: a rational, liberal and optimistic freethinker who exhibits a light hearted scepticism in religious matters. Johann admires Napoleon as a ‘great personality’, reflecting his generation’s endorsement of the classical ideal of Bildung as the formation of fully rounded character: ‘We can’t all be alike’ he tells his granddaughter Tony, ‘Each according to his lights’ (Mann, 1999: 7). Consequently, he is critical of the new generations’ emphasis on ‘practical ideas’ that has led to the growth in technical and commercial schools and a narrow and coarse materialism that ‘thinks of nothing but mines and factories and making money’ (1999: 20). In Buddenbrooks, Johann’s generation is the last instance of unified bürgerlich culture. They exemplify the ideal of authentic personality embedded in organic community that runs, as a line of German social thought, through Schiller, Tönnies, and

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\(^\text{10}\) The importance of these class distinctions is readily apparent in their zealous maintenance by the Buddenbrooks’ Prussian governess Ida Jungmann: ‘her rigid honesty and Prussian notions of caste made her perfectly suited to her position in the family. She was a person of aristocratic principles, drawing hair-line distinctions between class and class, and very proud of her position as servant of the higher orders’ (Mann, 1999: 7).
Lukács. The unity of this world is evident in Johann’s closet friends, the priest Wunderlich and the poet Hoffstede. For the first generation, the commercial, religious, and aesthetic exist in harmony and mutual accord.

In stark contrast to the vacillation and crippling inwardness that will undermine his descendants, Johann experiences no conflict between personal conscience, self-expression and the demands of business life. His good conscience and strength of purpose is typical of Sombart’s early capitalist period. They are the natural complements of the tangible immediacy of his productive achievements and an ideological certainty born from an age that had seen the central values of bourgeois culture enshrined as natural law. This confidence is evident in his attitude to the demise of the previous owners of the Buddenbrooks’ house. A once successful family, the Ratenkamps have recently fallen into insolvency. For the assembled Bürgers, the mention of bankruptcy prompts a pause in conversation to contemplate this greatest of bourgeois tragedies. One of the guests characteristically suggests the tragedy was brought about by a lapse in business acumen. Paying little attention to his business, Dietrich Ratenkamp had brought in a new partner who had speculated disgracefully. Unable to accept a purely rational explanation, Johann’s son Jean, attributes their decline to higher causes:

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\text{He was like a man paralysed… What made him take Geelmaack into the business — a man who brought painfully little capital, and had not the best of reputations? He must have felt the need of sharing his heavy responsibility with someone, not much matter who, because he realised that the end was inevitable. The firm was ruined, the old family \textit{passée}… Dietrich Ratenkamp was driven by fate when he took Geelmaack into partnership. That was the way his destiny was to be fulfilled… He acted under the pressure of inexorable necessity}
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(Mann, 1999: 15)

These fatalistic ruminations are met with a ‘discreet smile’ by the thoroughly liberal Pastor Wunderlich and dismissed outright by Johann: ‘\textit{Assez Jean… That’s one of your \textit{idées}}’ (Mann, 1999: 15). A beneficiary of Enlightenment optimism, Johann has little use for abstract metaphysical speculation. Instead, his worldly pragmatism is sustained by unremitting faith in a deistic cosmos that is comprehensible by and receptive to the rational will.

In Johann’s generation, Mann rearticulates Freytag’s ascendant Bürgertum. While Freytag believed that the fusion of Enlightenment optimism and the Protestant Ethic was founded
upon immutable natural law, Mann locates the efficacy of this posture at a specific historic juncture. Secure in his faith in the natural order and his own capacities, Johann is the last of the Buddenbrooks capable of accepting the world in a resolute and unquestioning manner. Prosperous, cultured and esteemed by his peers, he stands at the apex of secular bourgeois life. Starting from this ideal of confident and robust bourgeois life, Mann interrogates the sufficiency of this life posture. The first serious challenge to Johann’s worldview arrives with the terminal illness of his wife. The spectre of death disrupts the rhythm of everyday life and demands an answer:

He was looking with fixed gaze back into his own past life and life in general. It all seemed to him now quite strange and far away, and he shook his head a little. That empty noise and bustle, in the midst of which he had once stood, had flowed away imperceptibly and left him standing there, listening in wonder to sounds that died upon his ear. “Strange, strange.” He murmured. (Mann, 1999: 57)

A practical man throughout his life, Johann has maintained an enlightened scepticism to those who seek meaning and cause beyond the discernible world of facts. Following the death of his wife, he loses his taste for business and retires. At moments he finds comfort in family, singing droll lullabies to his grandchildren. They are his heirs, a secular substitute for immortality. These moments are punctured by disquieting trains of thought that terminate in the refrain: ‘strange, strange’ (Mann, 1999: 57). Committed to an ideology that acknowledges only progress, he is bereft of symbols through which to comprehend his own decay. He descends into apathy, no longer able to share in the workaday world of those around him. On his death bed he tells his son to ‘keep your courage up’ and his grandson to ‘be something worthwhile’ before dying with the refrain upon his lips (1999: 58). In the face of death, this cultured man of the Enlightenment can only bequeath a sense of duty and the maintenance of dignity to his heirs. For Johann’s descendants, the spectre of meaningless death increasingly undermines the Buddenbrooks’ self-assured vitality and gives birth to a gnawing inner life.

The Religious

With the second generation, the symptoms of decline become apparent. Jean inherits his father’s work ethic, but it exists in terse alliance with a Pietistic conscience that is a product of post-Enlightenment religious revivalism. He is a supporter of the ‘practical ideals’ of the
bourgeois king Louis Philippe (Mann, 1999: 20). They are codifications of the Protestant imperative towards rational and methodical life conduct. As Protestant metaphysics eclipse Enlightenment worldliness, the public sphere ceases to be the site of immanent fulfilment and takes on an instrumental quality: vocation is no longer experienced as an expression of individuality and the unfolding of personality but as a source of duty and means of salvation.

Committed to practical religious life, Jean is suspicious of anything that lies beyond the ken of the dutiful performance of vocation: ‘I have always objected to the perpetual occupation of young heads with Greek and Latin. When there are so many other important subjects, necessary as a preparation for the practical affairs of life’ (Mann, 1999: 81). Under a narrow practical lens, commercial life is increasingly characterised by sober calculation and a lifeless formalism. Echoing Weber, Mann locates Jean’s piety at the cradle of modern capitalism. As the emphasis on ‘practical affairs’ gains force, economic rationalism spreads outwards from the public sphere to permeate every facet of the Buddenbrooks’ life. On a psychological level, this transition is marked by a laming of personality: emotion and higher sentiments retreat first into the domestic sphere before dwindling in private conscience.

The gulf between the generations is evident in their responses to family discord. Johann’s oldest son Gotthold, against his father’s will, married a girl below his station. The disloyalty was a double blow to the family: they lost the dowry that would have come with a suitable marriage and have suffered the ignominy of having a relative working in a common shop. Despite previous financial settlement, Gotthold continues to lay claim to a further share in the family’s burgeoning estate. He appeals to Johann as a father, Christian and businessman. With harsh but sure reasoning, Johann dismisses the demands: Gotthold lost his claim on family with his pursuit of self-interest and his appeal to Christian compassion is nothing but thinly disguised greed. From a business perspective, there is no legal obligation to his son and the request would severely weaken the firm. But for Jean, the affair prompts soul searching. Torn between Christian compassion and duty to the firm, he is the first Buddenbrook to find their bourgeois ethos problematic:

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11 Louis Phillipe’s progressive economic and political policies and tendency to dress like a banker made him an inspiration for the European bourgeoisie leading to Karl Marx’s patronising appellation ‘the bourgeois king’ (Marx as cited in Hamilton, 1991: 35).
But this bitter feud with my own brother, with your eldest son, is like a hidden crack in the building we have erected. A family should be united father. It must keep together. ‘A house divided against itself will fall.’

(Mann, 1999: 37)

His internal battle is only resolved through the triumph of his rational calculating side. After painstaking deliberation, he succeeds in reducing the dilemma to purely pragmatic and economic considerations. The firm could not bear the loss, so Gotthold’s claim, whatever its legitimacy, must be dismissed. Jean’s siding with the firm sets the precedent for future generations. Throughout the novel, religion, compassion, love and personal freedom will all be sacrificed on the altar of duty.

Behind this decision is the growing reification of family and firm. Jean, an avid student of family genealogy, is amazed by his father’s unhistorical nature: ‘He stood with both feet firmly planted in the present, and concerned himself seldom with the past of his family’ (Mann, 1999: 44). For Jean, family history provides the solace of belonging to a proud tradition and a model of conduct that soothes his scruples about business life. There is however a darker side to the reliance on tradition. For the generations following Johann, worldly confidence is succeeded by a defensive posture, the fatalistic acceptance of duty and an increasingly forlorn attempt to maintain social prestige and accustomed standards of living. Tradition becomes the nursemaid of bad conscience. It provides a set of predetermined forms of behaviour for those who lack the confidence required to shape their own destiny. The rigidity and anxiety that accompanies the yoke of tradition is evident in Jeans’ correspondence with his son Thomas. He writes of his failure to develop the business after his own father’s death and that ‘I live in hope that God will preserve my powers unimpaired, and that by His gracious help I may succeed in re-establishing the firm on its old basis’ (1999: 64).

Ostensibly, Jean’s traditionalism coupled with his personal motto ‘work, pray and save’ places his motivations in the familiar territory of the Protestant Work Ethic (Mann, 1999: 147). His work is the natural expression of duty to God and his family’s success a sign of grace. However, the sense of duty to family and God that informs this ethic masks the growing import of money and the maintenance of station in all of his actions. Through Jean’s
religiosity, Mann illustrates the subtle hypocrisy and false consciousness of a society whose religious veneer increasingly shrouds purely pecuniary motivations.

The confluence of religious and financial motivations is most readily apparent in the growing pragmatism that lies behind Buddenbrook marriages.\footnote{Johann married his first wife for love but after her death married the daughter of a rich and esteemed merchant. This marriage set the standard for future unions. Under his father’s advice, Jean married into the wealthy Kröger family in what ‘could hardly be called a love match’ but which ‘could bring the firm a splendid marriage portion’ and therefore ‘he had accepted the situation with alacrity; and from the first moment had honoured his wife as the mate entrusted to him by God’ (Mann, 1999: 44). By the third generation, the importance of money in marital motivations can only be obscured by wilful ignorance. Jean’s son Thomas maintains ‘For my future father-in-law is a millionaire. Heavens. What is there to say? We are such complex, contradictory creatures! I deeply love and respect Gerda Arnoldsen; and I simply will not delve deep down enough in myself to find out how much the thought of the dowry, which was whispered in my ear that first evening, contributed to my feeling’ (1999: 239).} This tendency is typified in the marriage of Jean’s daughter Tony to Bendix Grünlich (greenish), a merchant from Hamburg. He appears dressed in English fashion, a symbol of deviation from Lübeckian traditionalism. Upon being introduced to the family, he hits all the right chords, praising their cultural refinement, wealth and the beauty of their surrounds. He takes pains to divulge the religious etymology of his first name and that his ‘business is very flourishing’ (Mann, 1999: 79). Where the children quickly see through this fawning sycophant, for Jean and his wife, Grünlich’s ostensible wealth and piety make him ‘a capable, cultured and energetic Christian man’ and therefore an ideal match for Tony (1999: 82). In their ardent appreciation of Tony’s suitor, material and religious sentiments have become inseparable.

Hoping to find true love, Tony refuses Grünlich’s advances. However, in a moment of candour, her father explains to her what it means to be a Buddenbrook:

> We are not free, separate, and independent entities, but like links in a chain, and we could not by any means be what we are without those who went before us and showed us the way, by following the straight and narrow path, not looking to right or left.

(Mann, 1999: 120)

Like the philistines caricatured in Theodore Fontanne’s *Jenny Treibel* (1892) and Heinrich Mann’s *The Man of Straw* (1913), the Buddenbrooks are exemplars of bourgeois self-deception. They pay ostensible tribute to higher values, but in life’s crucial moments they will act pragmatically and in accordance with their station. Financial gain comes to permeate
the most intimate aspects of their lives. As pecuniary interests escalate, dowry sizes are whispered into suitors’ ears, and deaths are followed not only by funerals but by the reading of wills and the strengthening of ‘working capital’ (Mann, 1999: 194). For the Buddenbrooks, loyalty to family and firm ultimately requires the subordination of everything antithetical to the acquisition and preservation of money. Through the trials and tribulations of a single family, the economic heart of the bürgerlich world is exposed. Fires in Hamburg, wars, unification, depressions and booms; as the novel progresses, the sum of misery and happiness in the world is increasingly reducible to financial calculus.

While the love of money is progressively exposed as the primary source of motivation, religion maintains a consolatory function. For Jean, the family diary increasingly becomes a site not only of tradition but of communion with values that have retreated from the public sphere:

The pen hurried glibly over the paper, with here and there a commercial flourish talking with God in every line…. He had written enough; that he might let well enough alone, and go in to see his wife, or out to the counting-house. Oh, fie, fie! Did one so soon weary of communion with his lord and saviour? Was it not robbing his God to scant Him of the service?

(Mann, 1999: 42)

Where Protestant asceticism had provided strength of character and sense of purpose for Weber’s ‘heroic bourgeoisie’, religion for Jean has become an emotional release for the aspects of personality stifled in his role as the head of the firm. As he ages, the Buddenbrooks’ house becomes a popular destination for travelling clergy, a site of ‘sickly and languishing tenderness for the little Jesus’ (Mann, 1999: 229). Denied expression in commercial life, religious sentiment retreats into the home and becomes the first site of inwardness for a family increasingly too sensitive to participate in the outside world.

**The Antiquarian**

In Jean’s children, Thomas, Christian and Tony, there is further degeneration from heightened sensitivity and hypocrisy to a debilitating incapacity to participate in bourgeois life. As the Buddenbrooks’ ethos becomes increasingly problematic, each of Jean’s children
represents a different posture towards the fragmenting \textit{bürgerlich} world: the antiquarian, the ironic and the decadent.

Inheriting her father’s historical sense but lacking his humility, Tony Buddenbrook has the snobbish and affected bearing of one born into the best of families. Consequently, her outlook is more aristocratic that bourgeois: the emphasis on personal achievement and service has been almost entirely supplanted by a sense of hereditary entitlement. ‘Saturated with her family’s history’, Tony is a naïve actor, so enamoured with her role that she has lost any sense of her performance.\footnote{The following discussion of Tony is indebted to Nietzsche’s notion of the antiquarian spirit that is most fully developed in his essay \textit{The Use and Abuse of History for Life} (Nietzsche, 2000).} As the daughter of a merchant dynasty, she is certain how its third act will play out:

She had always known, of course that she should one day marry, and be the wife of a businessman, and embark upon a solid and advantageous married life, commensurate with the position of the family and the firm… It was her \textit{vocation} to enhance the brilliance of the family and the firm in her allotted way.  
(Mann 1999: 86-87; my italics)

Tony knows that the privilege of being a Buddenbrooks comes with duties and obligations. She accepts Grünlich despite her personal aversion because the marriage will maintain her in her accustomed station and further her family’s interests. When Grünlich is eventually exposed as an insolvent fraud, he beseeches his father-in-law to stave off his creditors. The ensuing scene between Jean and Tony is a masterful exposition of bourgeois pretence. Acknowledging that he forced his daughter into a dubious marriage, Jean attempts to elicit her true feelings. His Christian turns of phrase mask more calculative intentions. If she has learnt to love Grünlich then he will grudgingly agree to settle his debts. In turn, reveling in the potential for melodrama, Tony assumes the mantle of the devoted and suffering wife. She will dutifully stand-by her husband whatever the personal costs. This theatrical stalemate is only breeched when the cost of covering Grünlich’s debts is established. Jean calculates that:

The firm has suffered losses already quite apart from this affair, and that the surrender of a sum like this would be a blow from which it would recover with difficulty. I do not in any way say this to — ” He did not finish. Tony had sprung up, had even taken a few steps backward, and with the wet handkerchief still in her hand she cried: “Good! Enough! Never!” She looked almost heroic. The words
“the firm” had struck home. It is highly probable that they had more effect even than her dislike of Herr Grünlich.

(Mann, 1999: 181)

Beyond Christian sentiment and marital responsibility, father and daughter are reunited in unshakable devotion to the firm.

Returning to her parent’s home after her divorce, Tony remains hopeful a further marriage will atone for her divorce and restore her to her rightful place. She marries Herr Permaneder, a Bavarian hop merchant but grows to despise the leisurely pace and lack of refinement of the Catholic south. Permaneder is unambitious and fails to provide the requisite levels of comfort and prestige for a Buddenbrook. After discovering him in a drunken embrace with a maid, she has her excuse to leave and her second marriage comes to an abrupt end. Her hopes shift to her daughter’s wedding—ironically referred to as ‘Tony Buddenbrook’s third marriage’—only to be further disappointed when the newly acquired son-in-law is convicted of fraud (Mann, 1999: 369).

Despite these failures, Tony’s unshakable faith in the Buddenbrook cause leaves her spirit unbroken. Impervious to the winds of change, she remains an obstinate bastion of tradition and a haughty counterpoint to her brothers’ decline. Psychologically, she typifies what Nietzsche diagnosed as hypertrophy of the ‘antiquarian spirit’: the impoverishment of contemporary life through excessive veneration of the past (Nietzsche, 2000: 74-77). Throughout her life, Tony seamlessly transitions between roles: virtuous housewife, worldly divorcée, grieving daughter and family matriarch. In each role, she is a slave to abiding form. There is a stiffness in her bearing and excessive attention to public perception that belies a largely superficial engagement. Tony can represent but has little comprehension of any substantive value beyond appearances. Typical of the antiquarian, spontaneity and authentic engagement are subordinated to the maintenance of inherited form. Bürgerlichkeit, once a lived ideal, is now the raiment of an actress who can only engage with life through a script.

Buddenbrooks shares in the contemporary concerns of Gabriele Reuter’s widely read novel From a Good Family (1895). Both explore the restricted roles for bourgeois women in late nineteenth century Germany. They expose the female side of the iron cage: the home, as much as the workplace, is a site of uncompromising and inflexible standards. Family life in
*Buddenbrooks* supports Baudelaire’s caustic observation that a man ‘could not be a good businessman and a good lover’ (as cited in Wells, 2008: 26). Absorbed with business, the men of the novel are cold and inattentive husbands, while their wives lead bored and largely unfulfilled lives. Caged within affluent homes, their days consist of domestic governance, charity work, and home decorations. A portrait of ennui and staid convention, it is only Mann’s irony and comic sense that prevent ‘poor Tony’ from assuming her place with Madame Bovary, Anna Karenina and Effi Briest in the pantheon of unfulfilled bourgeois women (Mann, 1999: 300).

Tony symbolises the emotional cost of the Buddenbrooks’ ethos. Down the generations, marriages deteriorate from love matches, to arrangements of ‘mutual respect and deference’ and finally to grim alliances of outright indifference and neglect (Mann, 1999: 44). Love is increasingly antithetical to duty as cold utility penetrates the family hearth. As sentiment is devalued, the Buddenbrooks seem to confirm Karl Marx’s charge that ‘the bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation’ (Marx & Engels, 2002: 222).

**The Ironic**

‘Marked from the cradle as a merchant’, Jean’s eldest son Thomas ‘looked forward seriously and eagerly to his career’ (Mann, 1999: 53 & 61). Thomas is intelligent, serious and ambitious, but he also exhibits un-bourgeois tendencies: he has an aristocratic predilection for the arts and a cosmopolitan sense of style and refinement that runs against the parochial sensibilities of the Bürgers of Lübeck. Despite these eccentricities, he proves himself a willing servant of the Buddenbrooks’ cause. As a young man, he falls in love with a Malay-looking shop girl, but in contrast to his uncle Gotthold, ends the relationship to ‘make a good match’ for family and firm (1999: 137). However, his marriage to the extremely wealthy—but equally exotic—Gerda Arnoldson, suggests the unacknowledged persistence of errant tendencies. Despite being a good economic match, Gerda is a distant and over-refined aesthete. Shortly after their meeting, Thomas romantically declares, ‘this one or no one’ (1999: 238). But he refuses to contemplate how much the sizable dowry contributed to his feelings: ‘I love her: but it crowns my happiness and pride to think that when she becomes mine, our firm will at the same time gain a very considerable increase in capital’ (1999: 239).
For Thomas, this admixture of wealth and refinement satisfies divided tendencies. The marriage makes good bourgeois sense and Gerda is a spousal compensation for the aspect of personality suppressed in his role as a Buddenbrook.

Following the death of Gotthold, Thomas reflects on his uncle’s failure to subordinate individual caprice to a higher calling:

To cherish a vision of abstract good; to carry in your heart, like a hidden love, only far sweeter, the dream of preserving an ancient name, an old family, an old business, of carrying it on, and adding more honour and lustre… But that takes imagination and idealism—and you didn’t have it.

(Mann, 1999: 227)

Cultured and widely travelled, Thomas is keenly aware of the narrow horizons of the bürgerlich world. He inherits the family work ethic, but lacks the religious conviction of his father or the natural relationship to vocation of his grandfather. Consequently, he is the first in the Buddenbrook line to develop an ironic sense of self; his love of bürgerlich values and conventions coexists with an understanding of the cultural and intellectual limitations of his provincial cadre. Where preceding generations almost instinctively endorsed their worldview, Thomas’ ‘idealism’ is founded on civic and familial pride and elective commitment.

This ‘idealism’ places as much emphasis on the maintenance of convention as it does substantive content: ‘Thomas Buddenbrooks’ first law was to preserve “the dehors”; wherein he showed himself not so different from his fellow burghers’ (Mann, 1999: 259). As the religious and traditional motivations for morality recede, outward signs of propriety become more essential than inner conviction. Behind the irreproachable reputations of the merchants lies a pathological fear of scandal and an ever vigilant propriety that safeguards against gossip and social reproof. The oppressive bourgeois morality of ‘this little commercial town on the Baltic’ is evident in Thomas’ condemnation of his uncle (1999: 227). Against Gotthold’s pursuit of his own course in life, Thomas maintains that character and self-fulfilment can only emerge through the capacity to wed oneself to a higher purpose. With ironic fidelity, he accepts his inherited world and affirms the values of its venerable merchant tradition. He maintains that through elective commitment, life moves beyond imposed limitations to a sense of the poetic. One can be a ‘Caesar even in a little commercial town’
(1999: 227). This notion is further developed in his antipathy to the self-preoccupation of his feckless brother:

I had once an inclination to it myself. But I observed that it made me unsteady, hare-brained, and incapable—and control, equilibrium, is, at least for me, the important thing. There will always be men who are justified in this interest in themselves… poets who can express with clarity and beauty their privileged inner life… But the like of us are simple merchants… it would be much better, deuce take it, if we sat down and accomplished something as our fathers did before us.

(Mann, 1999: 219)

The fascination with the inner life grates against his bourgeois sense of propriety. As the scion of a venerable merchant house, he was born for practical life. Aware from an early age of his un-bourgeois inclinations, he strives for order and self-control through the suppression of the aspects of his personality incongruous with his vocation.

After the premature death of his father, Thomas assumes control of the firm. Still a young man, he welcomes ‘the daily struggle for success’ as a test of personal commitment and a channel for blossoming vitality (Mann, 1999: 221). He pontificates to a former schoolmate that ‘a businessman cannot be a bureaucrat… It takes personality… I always want to direct things on the spot… to govern it with the immediate influence of my will and talent’ (1999: 221). Under his stewardship the firm prospers and takes its first tentative steps towards the late capitalist world:

Soon after Thomas Buddenbrooks seized the reigns a fresher and more enterprising spirit began to be noticeable in management… Risks were taken now and then… The credit of the house, formerly a conception, a theory, a luxury, was constantly strained and utilised.

(Mann, 1999: 220)

In *Buddenbrooks*, the emergent bourgeois economy is depicted through the interplay of socio-economic and psychological developments. At the beginning of the novel, family and firm reside under one roof and there is a tangible relationship between office correspondence and traded wares. Behind the practices of the firm, the port, warehouses and wagons that trundle through Lübeck’s cobbled streets are concrete signs of participation in a wider mercantile tradition. As time progresses, there is increasing talk of the utilisation of capital, the stock market, usury, and other speculative ventures. No longer restrained by tradition, the
market becomes more volatile. Fortunes that were previously built over generations are now quickly won or lost on the Exchange.

Accompanying this transition is the elevation of money to an absolute end. Where in the early capitalist period wealth remained primarily a means for the ‘preservation of life values’, Thomas’ milieu reflects the growing prominence of a purely ‘acquisitive spirit’ (Sombart, 1967: 153-167). The early Bürgers possessed a Lockean pride in private property and conservative outlook that arose from concrete social relations. Their property was intimately bound to their lives: it conveyed status, expressed their ultimate values and was pivotal to their sense of self. With the transition from a ready-at-hand to a paper economy, higher values that had previously been associated with property are increasingly overshadowed by pecuniary evaluations. The calculative eye of the modern businessman reduces the contents of life to their monetary exchange value. As qualitative hierarchies dissolve, house and firm, the sacred and traditional, become utilisable credit. In a culture levelled by monetary equivalence, they are now only one source of capital and means of accumulation amongst many.

The growing divorce of money from higher values is evident in the three generations of the family. In the opening scenes of the novel, money is directly connected to the Buddenbrooks’ lives. The new house, heirlooms and lavish dinners establish its tangible immediacy. By Jean’s generation, money is more insubstantial but still calculable in relation to the interests of the family and firm. For Thomas, money is only comprehensible in abstract terms. Following the reading of his father’s will he excitedly surmises ‘we must have already passed a million’ before declaring ‘we have our work cut out for us’ (Mann, 1999: 211-212). In a world that is now governed by the insubstantiality of monetary exchange, it is no longer clear what this ‘million’ relates to or what work remains to be done. For the earlier generations, money and work had been means through which to service higher ends. With the atrophy of the higher values that originally inspired the accumulation of capital, money has become an end in itself in what Georg Simmel referred to as ‘the colonisation of ends by means’ (Simmel, 1997: 250).

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14 When Jean discusses the capital of the firm, it is calculated in relation to the expenditure of family and firm. Jean can confidently announce: ‘There is the position, in round figures, aside from small fluctuations in the capital. You see, my dear Betsy, we are not rich’ (Mann, 1999: 64).
Struggling to reconcile his sense of tradition with ‘responsibilities to the new age’, Thomas Buddenbrooks is a transitory figure between the Bürger and the bourgeoisie (Mann, 1999: 295). Initially, he is extremely successful. Following in the traditions of the commercial elite, he is active in the town’s affairs, at first as consul to the Netherlands and later as a Senator of Lübeck. He also becomes a trusted advisor to the Mayor and first consulted in municipal affairs. As the least provincially minded in the district, he is able to arbitrate between tradition and progress. He oversees the restoration of monuments from the Hanseatic era while at the same time pressing for new railways and tariff reform. Admired or envied by all, his ascent to the heights of Lübeck’s society is consecrated with the building of a magisterial townhouse (1999: 344).

Yet, at the height of his personal powers and civic renown—a success by any bourgeois standard—he begins to question the meaning of his endeavours. As civic and business demands escalate, it takes all his talents to accommodate the punctiliousness of his elders ‘and yet to keep the reins in his own hands’ (Mann, 1999: 343). Unable to relax between commitments, his nervous energy and relentless self-scrutiny are symptomatic of a hounding Protestant Ethic: ‘he concentrated with equal violence whether the subject of his thought was a business manoeuvre… or a decision to renew his entire stock of linen’ (1999: 343-344). He becomes obsessed with maintaining a flawless appearance, changing his clothes twice a day. Accused of vanity by his peers, his flawless attire is the outwards expression of the rigid discipline and purity required to keep in check the anarchic tendencies that threaten to devour him from within. Still in his thirties his confidence and energy begin to wane:

It is as though something had begun to slip — as though I haven’t the firm grip I once had on events.
— What is success? It is an inner, and indescribable force, resourcefulness, power of vision, a consciousness that I am, by my mere existence, exerting pressure on the movement of life around me… Fortune and success lie with ourselves. We must hold them firmly — deep within us. For as soon as something begins to slip, to relax, to get tired, within us, then everything will rebel and struggle to withdraw from our influence. One thing follows another, blow after blow — and the man is finished… It doesn’t need to be death. But the decline, the falling-off, the beginning of the end.

(Mann, 1999: 352)

The notion of ‘success’ and foreboding of decline in this passage suggest just how far Thomas has moved away from the precepts of his grandfather. Johann saw vocation as a natural extension of personality that was supported by a deistic cosmos. He was so
comfortable in his role as a merchant that it warranted no discussion. The active and commercial life could be led with unremitting confidence in the motivations and legitimations that lay below. For Jean, religious sanctification fortified this certitude into a calling. The family’s wealth and prosperity were signs of grace. He was but the latest in a line of Buddenbrooks called to God’s service. Lacking the natural confidence of his grandfather, or his father’s faith, Thomas has only his self-perception through which to gauge success. Consequently, while the idea of vocation maintains its existential gravity, it has lost its traditional supports.

Success for Thomas is the satisfaction of seeing that the world bends to his demands; the expression of an almost Nietzschean will to overcome internal and external obstacles. Secularising the Puritan ideal of his father, he believes that through self-will he can achieve a sense of poise and purpose that is the secular equivalence of grace. It is a hard won yet fragile condition, potentially shattered by the slightest lapse or indiscretion. In the past, his success had naturally sustained this feeling. But as small business failures emerge, he interprets them as signs of waning ability. His musings suggest a growing rear-guard nature to his ethic. The language is no longer of enterprise and daring but of holding on, the wilful attempt to maintain or rediscover a state that previously came more easily. Without internal surety, he can find no satisfaction in outward standards of bourgeois success: ‘House’ and ‘senator’, these external symbols are only the petrified residue of previous achievement. They vouchsafe nothing for the inner condition, for Thomas is aware that ‘often the outward and visible material signs and symbols of happiness and success only show themselves when the process of decline has already set in’ (Mann, 1999: 352). It is the activity more than the result that is prized. Indeed, success must be wrested each day anew from both self and world.

With each commercial failure the inner burden of business life mounts. While the firm remains financially secure, ‘the notion that his luck and consequence had fled, based as it was more upon inward feeling than upon outward facts, brought him to a state of lowness and suspicion’ (Mann, 1999: 385). Plagued by doubt and wearied by a constant need for self-affirmation, the ‘enterprising spirit’ of his youth gives way to ‘petty retail transactions and

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15 Thomas’ ruminations on success are suggestive of the emergence of what Joseph Schumpeter, influenced by Nietzsche, saw as the ‘psychological motivation’ of the modern entrepreneur. See, for instance, ‘the joy of creating, of getting things done, or simply of exercising one’s energy and ingenuity’ (Schumpeter as cited in Bogle, 2005: 221).
the pennywise policies’ (1999: 385-386). He becomes a miser and pedant in a desperately attempt to maintain control over his life. Despite his prudence, he suffers heavy financial losses in the Prussian-Austrian war of 1866. Yet in the midst of this crisis, business failures are overshadowed by a deeper sense of despondency:

For the first time in his career he had fully and personally experienced the ruthless brutality of business life and seen how all the better, gentler, and kinder sentiments creep away and hid themselves before the one raw, naked, dominating instinct of self-preservation.

(Mann, 1999: 387)

Behind the veil of culture, self-preservation is exposed as the highest law: ‘Misfortunes in business’ are met even by one’s closest friends ‘not with sympathy, not with compassion, but with suspicion – cold, cruel, hostile suspicion’ (Mann, 1999: 387). Yet, it is self-suspicion that proves the most damming. His father and grandfather had been men of eminent practicality who stood firmly in the world. They had endorsed the family motto: ‘My son, attend with zeal, to thy business by day; but do none that hinders thee from sleep at night’ (1999: 396). But Thomas can no longer attend with zeal or a good conscience. His anxious days and ‘sleepless nights’ are filled with ‘revulsion and disgust at the hateful and shameless harshness of life!’ (1999: 387). Torn between moral compunction and contempt for his own scruples, Thomas’ entire existence is brought into question in a moment of Hamletic doubt:

Was he, Thomas Buddenbrook, a man of action, a business man — or was he a finicking dreamer? Yes that was the question. It had always been, as far back as he could remember the question…. And how many times had he answered it: in strong purposeful hours with one answer, in weak and discouraged ones with another! But he was too shrewd and too honest not to admit, after all, that he was a mixture of both.

(Mann, 1999: 386)

Thomas knows that these musings would have been entirely foreign to his ancestors. His question itself is a symptom of lack of conviction, a confession of weakness, for ‘a man who stands firm and confident in his own calling, whatever it may be, recognises it, understands only it, values only it’ (Mann, 1999: 389). In his youth he had been able to ‘sternly bring his feelings into line’ and take decisive action. Now weary, and horrified by the realities of the world, his mind is crowded with a host of competing thoughts and inclinations that vex his will (1999: 386). He is the first in his family to suffer the divide between the realm of higher
sentiment and the coarseness of the bourgeois world that threatens to paralyse all of Mann’s introspective characters.

In a last ditched attempt to overcome his lassitude, Thomas surrenders his principles to the dictates of the market. He is offered the possibility of buying an unharvested crop from an insolvent aristocrat for half its value. It is a deal seen as typical of the newly emergent speculative economy. Instinctively, he finds the situation morally reprehensible, a case of usurious profit, the sort of deal conducted by ‘Jews’ and ‘cut-throats’ (Mann, 1999: 375). Yet, he is haunted by the idea that this transaction is a sign, a test of his capacity to accept the reality of the business world. If he is successful in the endeavour, he will be returned to confidence in his vocation. Amidst a host of post-factum legitimations, this ‘man of action’ wages war against his divided self. He accepts the deal: ‘He, Thomas Buddenbrook, as a business man, was taking advantage of the market’ (1999: 390). At the firm’s centennial celebration, a telegram brings the news that a hailstorm has destroyed the harvest. With the loss of the crop his personal failure is confirmed. After surrendering his principles to the market, sickened by its relentless brutality, and confirmed in his inner weakness, he is ripe for decay.

By the age of forty-two Thomas is a worn-out man. No longer able to muster the enthusiasm for action, nor any hope for future renewal, he dejectedly surveys his fate:

The imaginative grasp, the brave idealism of his youth were gone. To work at his play, to play at his work, to bend an ambition that was half-earnest, half whimsical, towards the accomplishment of aims that even to himself possessed but a symbolic value—for such blithe scepticism and such an enlightened spirit of compromise, a great deal of vitality is necessary, as well as a sense of humour. And Thomas Buddenbrook felt inexpressibly weary and disgusted.

(Mann, 1999: 493)

He has achieved all he can in the bourgeois world: wealth, esteem, civic titles and a stately home, but none of these have brought happiness. Worse, they persist as ubiquitous reminders of the vacuity of possession. In jest at his ‘faultless exterior’, his competitors claim his function in town is now ‘largely decorative’ (Mann, 1999: 493). The house, once a symbol of his ascent, in lived experience is cold and extravagant. It is a mausoleum of desire and ambition. Family also offers no consolation. He suspects his wife is having an affair with a Prussian officer—a virile mirror to his own impotence. And he realises his son, once his
source of hope for the future, is a sickly and oversensitive daydreamer, congenitally ill-equipped for practical life. There will be no business heir, and the firm will be dissolved. His life of service has ultimately been pointless:

He was empty within. There was no stimulus, no absorbing task into which he could throw himself. But his nervous activity, his inability to keep quiet, which was something entirely different from his father’s natural and permanent fondness for work, had not lessened, but increased — it had taken the upper hand and become his master… This craving for activity had become a martyrdom

(Mann, 1999: 495)

Behind the rising tide of pessimism lies the last vestiges of ascetic compulsion. Weber saw the Protestant Ethic as providing the early bourgeoisie with historically unparalleled willpower and self-control. Mann’s image of the degeneration of this type is one of disaggregation of the will, where a now mechanical compulsion to activity is confounded by instinctual anarchy and a lack of purposive ends. Without discipline or direction, the need to work is ‘dissipated’ in a ‘host of trivialities’ under the remorseless censure of a disgusted conscience (Mann, 1999: 495). Unlike Weber’s focused and determined proto-capitalists, Mann’s late Bürgers embody a Nietzschean sense of decadence: the entropy and disorientation that arise when one must ‘fight against the instincts’ (Nietzsche, 1977: 479).

Through his life, Thomas has sought to correct any feelings that are incongruous with his self-image as a practical business man. Now at the nadir of his commercial life, these ‘corrections’ are all that remains of his bourgeois personality. His toilette routine, previously an extension of self-control, now verges on mysophobia. It has become a gruelling ritual, that drives him to the edge of sanity, but temporarily restores the ‘sense of immaculate integrity’ he requires to face the world (Mann, 1999: 495). Through this constant labour of self-production he realises that nothing within naturally corresponds to the bürgerlich ideal. All is forced and artificial. Through years of discipline he has been playing a role for which he has been miscast:

Thomas Buddenbrook’s existence was no different from that of an actor — an actor whose life had become one long production, but for a few brief hours for relaxation, consumes him increasingly… his inner impoverishment oppressed him almost without any relief, with a constant dull chagrin.

(Mann, 1999: 496)
In the absence of hope or purpose, shame and a lingering sense of honour and duty drive him onwards to ‘be worthily representative, to conceal his inward decline, and preserve “the dehors” whatever it cost him’ (Mann, 1999: 496). The bürgerlich ethic of his ancestors, once the expression of deepest conviction, has degenerated into a bourgeois mask which conceals inner weariness and turmoil. With each performance, a feeling of ‘satisfaction and adequacy’ accompanies the enactment of form. At times, he can lose himself in the role, but when he is offstage the emptiness returns.

Thomas’ decline suggests the potential for psychic disturbance behind the ostensible normalcy and stolid regularity of the late bourgeois world. Inwardly impoverished but meticulously attired, he has become inflexible, cold, distant and unforgiving. They are the characteristics of one whom, no longer trusting instinct, and in fear of disclosure, must rigidly adhere to external expectation. Trapped within the iron cage of bourgeois personality, he is a prisoner too ashamed to speak of his confinement or suffering. There is a sense of tragic pathos in Thomas’ self-aware performance that is beyond the ken of Tony’s naïve production. He has become a bourgeois Hamlet to her Don Quixote, resigned to carry on without conviction as a faithless servant to abiding form.

In Science as Vocation, Max Weber beseeched his audience to adopt a posture of stoic heroism. For those fated to live in ‘disenchanted times’, a bourgeois vocation could still provide a sense of personal integrity and allowed for a modest humanism and sober acceptance of ‘the demands of the day’ (Weber, 1946: 156). In contrast, Thomas Mann’s decadent characters are more existentially despondent. They have pierced the veil of facile bourgeois optimism and suffer from the disgust of insight. Vocationally, if they resist decline, they are taxed by ascetic struggle and an ever increasing sense of weariness and futility.

Thomas Buddenbrook’s struggles anticipate the stringent maintenance of form and military-like discipline of Mann’s later bourgeois servant, Gustav von Aschenbach in Death in Venice.

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16 This idea of late bourgeois vocation as a ‘nihilistic mask’ that hides instinctual rancour is taken up in Georg Lukács’ essay The Bourgeois Way of Life and Art for Art’s Sake (Lukács, 1975: 55-78).
17 Jochen Vogt and Harvey Goldman have pointed to the militaristic nature of Thomas’ ethic (Vogt, 1983: 64-67; Goldman, 1991: 76).
Gustav Aschenbach was the literary spokesman for all those who labor on the verge of exhaustion, those who are overburdened, already ground down, barely managing to stay upright—all those moralists of accomplishment who, puny of body and chary of means, husband their resources, and apply exaltation of the will so that they may attain, at least for a while, the effect of greatness. There are many such people; they are the heroes of the age.

(Mann, 1998: 297)

For those that have moved beyond the yoke of erstwhile values towards debilitating insight, all that can be aspired to is a ‘heroism of weakness’ (Mann, 1998: 297). This is the dignified posture of the weary and melancholic; those who are disillusioned but affirm inherited values despite being unequal to the burden of their fate. Anticipating Albert Camus’s Myth of Sisyphus (1955), Mann establishes the notion of modern vocation as a lonely and intractable task. Yet despite disillusionment, like Sisyphus, the refusal to submit to the fate of the times lends life something of a heroic character. For Mann, Durchhalten (hold fast or carry through) was to be a watchword for Godless times. While his bourgeois ‘heroes’ are chained to a task in which they can never truly succeed, they can gain some sense of satisfaction in self-discipline, personal bearing and integrity and thereby keep absolute failure at bay.

At the age of forty-eight, presiding over a dwindling empire and suffering mounting health problems, Thomas begins to contemplate the end. Throughout his life he had remained ironically detached from the religion of his parents, similarly, the ‘comfortable superficiality of old Johann could not satisfy his metaphysical and spiritual needs’ (Mann, 1999: 523). In the past, he had flirted with Catholicism, before finding answers more in line with his experiences in Darwinian science. But when he contemplated his own mortality, under the ‘penetrating eye of death’, these answers provided no solace:

He was at bottom... the born Protestant: full of the true Protestant’s passionate, relentless sense of personal responsibility. No, in the ultimate things there was, there could be, no help from outside, no mediation, no absolution, no soothing-syrup, no panacea. Each one of us, alone, unaided, of his own powers, must unravel the mystery before it was too late, must wring for himself a pious readiness before the hour of death, or else part in despair.

(Mann, 1999: 523)

One nondescript afternoon, whilst avoiding the burdens of office routine, Thomas stumbles upon the second volume of a philosophical system that seems to provide the key to his
existence: Arthur Schopenhauer's magnum opus *The World as Will and Representation* (1844). Largely unacknowledged in his lifetime, Schopenhauer was widely read in the later-half of the nineteenth century (Blackbourn, 1998: 42). He became a figurehead for scepticism over bourgeois notions of self and world and the burgeoning *Weltenschmerz* in late nineteenth century German thought. Transfixed, Thomas greedily devours the kindred thoughts of this pessimistic metaphysician:

He was filled with a great, surpassing satisfaction. It soothed him to see how a master-mind could lay hold on this strong, cruel, mocking thing called life and enforce it and condemn it. His was the gratification of the sufferer who has always had a bad conscience about his sufferings and concealed them from the gaze of a harsh, unsympathetic world, until suddenly, from the hand of an authority, he receives, as it were, justification and licence for his suffering. (Mann, 1999: 524)

Life for Schopenhauer is red in tooth and claw, a brutal struggle for survival predicated on a ruthless and irrational force he calls will. This will is the essence of the universe, beyond the subjective apprehension of the world through Kantian categories of time and space. Culture and civility, all higher aspects of existence are only epiphenomena: fragile constructions on the shifting sands of this primordial will. Indeed, on the individual level, the relationship of will to higher faculties is analogous to that of a ‘strong blind man carrying the sighted lame man on his shoulders’ (Schopenhauer, 1969: 209). Against bourgeois deism and the harmony of self-interest, Schopenhauer elevates the Hobbesian-Darwinian image of life to the metaphysical plane. Under such understanding, eudemonism must be superannuated by the more modest attempt to ameliorate suffering. Schopenhauer advises ascetic retreat from the world: his ideal is saintly quietude; the abnegation of will through the disinterested contemplation of Platonic forms.

Throughout his life, Thomas had chastised himself for his incapacity to meet the standards of bourgeois life. Now, his suffering is shown not to be a symptom of personal failure but inherent in the nature of things. In Schopenhauer’s system, it is will manifest as striving that is the cause of all human suffering:

All striving springs from want or deficiency, from dissatisfaction with one’s own state or condition, and is therefore suffering so long as it is not satisfied. No satisfaction is, however lasting; on the
contrary, it is always merely the starting point of fresh striving… that there is no ultimate aim of striving means there is no measure or end of suffering.

(Schopenhauer, 1969: 309)

The pursuit of worldly goals is not worth the suffering that accompanies striving. Even when goals are achieved, they provide only temporary respite. Driven on by an incessant will, attainment is inevitably followed by boredom and the reestablishment of desire. Oblivious to the irrational basis of their actions and the transitory nature of attainment, Schopenhauer’s bourgeoisie expend their lives in futile competition for status symbols and possessions that at best provide only a temporary reprieve from struggle and the illusion of progress towards the achievement of ultimate goals.

In addition to the futility of striving, there is a prescient existential point to Schopenhauer’s assessment. Behind the bourgeois world, with its egotism and self-importance, the individual is comically ephemeral, what Fyodor Dostoevsky decreed ‘tomorrow’s zero’ (Dostoevsky, 1973: 472). For Schopenhauer, it is only in death that instinctual torment and human finitude are redressed. Following Schopenhauer, Thomas finds comfort in the promise of death as the end of suffering and mystical reunion with infinity: ‘the human being stares hopelessly through the bared windows of his personality at the high walls of outward circumstance, till Death comes and calls him home to freedom’ (Mann, 1999: 526). For the world weary, death is not to be feared but longed for as a return from errant wanderings and the correction of original sin.

Yet, Thomas soon moves beyond ascetic resignation. While accepting Schopenhauer’s pessimistic premise, he rejects his conclusions: ‘Have I ever hated life – pure, strong,

18 Schopenhauer’s depiction of the primacy of irrational will anticipates Emile Durkheim’s concern with the anomic threat facing secular and deregulated societies. This relationship between Schopenhauer’s notion of the will and classical social theory has been established by Steven Mestrovic. In particular, Mestrovic points to Durkheim’s youthful fascination with Schopenhauer and the similarities between his description of anomie and Schopenhauer’s contemplation on the restless striving of the will (Mestrovic, 1988: 165-168).

19 The confluence of Schopenhauerian and Nietzschean perspectives in Thomas’ epiphany has been discussed by several commentators. See in particular (Heller, 1958: 27-67; Swales 1991: 69-75; Kaufmann, 1957: 90-91; Reed, 1996: 78-84). Eric Heller’s celebrated The Ironic German runs notably against the grain in its claim that Buddenbrooks ‘tells a story about people who live in a world philosophically interpreted by Schopenhauer’ (1958: 27). The sole emphasis on Schopenhauer diminishes the tension between affirmation and despair that runs through all of Mann’s work. As T. J. Reed has established, ‘Mann’s first awareness of Schopenhauer came through his reading of Nietzsche’ (Reed, 1996: 82-83). Looking back on Buddenbrooks, Mann, in a 1938 essay on Schopenhauer maintained: ‘Here, indeed, one thought who had read Nietzsche as well as Schopenhauer and carried the one experience over into the other, setting up the most extraordinary mixture with them’ (Mann, 1947: 396).
relentless life? Folly and misconception! I have but hated myself, because I could not bear it’ (Mann, 1999: 527). Suspicious of his own thoughts and feelings, he takes his attraction to Schopenhauer’s solution as a symptom of decadence; the final confirmation that he is an ineffectual dreamer rather than a man of action. Through a poetic inversion of Schopenhauer’s conclusions, he makes one final commitment to the bourgeois world. He will die a decadent failure but others will be born who are strong, joyous and unburdened by his crippling sensitivity. He shall live on in those able to say yes to life on its own terms. It is a utopic but thoroughly bourgeois dream: Thomas’ apogee is not Schopenhauer’s saint but a tempered version of Nietzsche’s blonde beast, a kind of robust and unsentimental scion of the marketplace.20

In *Buddenbrooks*, the battle for the soul of the Bürger is waged between Mann’s interpretation of Schopenhauerian and Nietzschean attitudes towards life.21 To follow Schopenhauer is to acknowledge the call of Geist (spirit) over nature and retreat from life into the inner word of intellectuality and moral and aesthetics refinement. In its acute form, this leads to disgust with the demands and restrictions of life and a yearning for release in romantic Liebestod (love of death). Conversely, to follow Nietzsche is to affirm nature over spirit and endorse the unreflective and energetic life of the modern bourgeoisie. This divide is his earliest formulation of the artist-bourgeois antithesis that persists throughout his work. It contains a series of oppositions: spirit-nature, intellect-instinct, art-life and sickness-health. His early Bürgers who have ‘gone astray’ embody the lure of knowledge and refined aesthetic sense coupled with a mild contempt for the banality of bourgeois existence (Mann, 1998: 196).

20 On Mann’s bourgeois reformulation of Nietzsche’s blonde beast see his biographical *A Sketch of My Life*: ‘True, the blonde beast haunts my own youthful work; but it is on the whole, divested of its bestial character, there is not much left of it but the blondeness and lack of mind’ (Mann, 1960: 23).

21 These postures are symbolically associated with Nietzsche’s love of glacial peaks and Schopenhauer’s fascination with the primordial sea. As Thomas Buddenbrook exclaims, ‘The real difference is in the look with which one pays homage to the other. It is a strong, challenging gaze, full of enterprise, that can soar from peak to peak; but the eyes that rest on the wide ocean and are soothed by the sight of its waves rolling on forever, mystically, restlessly, are those that are already wearied by looking too deep into the solemn perplexities of life.—Health and illness, that is the difference. The man whose strength is unexhausted climbs boldly up into the lofty multiplicity of the mountain heights. But it is when one is worn out with turning one’s eye inward upon the bewildering complexity of the human heart, that one finds peace in resting them on the wilderness of the sea’ (Mann, 1999: 538).
These artistic qualities exist in tension with a bad conscience, a sense of estrangement and ardent yearning for communion with simple, upright and active bourgeois life.\textsuperscript{22} For the early Mann, this tension is insoluble. Through introspection and distance from life, the higher gradations of the spirit are attained but they are bought at the cost of Hamlet like nausea and paralysis. In \textit{Buddenbrooks}, knowledge and action, the refinement of spirit and the coarseness of the world, remain in irreconcilable opposition. It was only beginning with \textit{The Magic Mountain} (1924), and culminating in his Joseph teratology (1933-1943), that Mann developed a more dialectical understanding of the nature and spirit divide and established the possibility of their harmonic synthesis. In his early works, particularly in \textit{Buddenbrooks}, the narrowness and intractability of the late bourgeois world leaves only the possibility of bourgeois life or social and spiritual isolation and despair.

Despite his Nietzschean affirmation, Thomas’ epiphany leaves him with nothing to live by. He awakes the next morning ashamed at the previous night’s transgressions that now grate against ‘his middle-class instincts’ (Mann, 1999: 528). Behind his ‘nervous pedantry’ and the barrage of inconsequential workaday details, his final days are lived in a kind of hypnotic fascination with death (1999: 528). After a botched dental appointment, he collapses from a stroke in the street, his flawless attire caked in mud. In death, a correspondence between his inner and outer life has finally been restored.

\textbf{The Decadent}

If Thomas’ struggle to maintain a sense of dignity and form represents a heroic response to decadence, his brother Christian embodies the consequences of passive capitulation. Christian’s fate is foreshadowed in his youth when it is light-heartedly suggested he should become a poet. While he is a gifted mimic and fabulist, there is no outlet for these talents in his merchant milieu. Consequently, he typifies the recurrent fate of Mann’s dilettantes; the sense of estrangement and absence of a meaningful source of identity that is suffered by those who fail to find a respectable vocation.\textsuperscript{23} In an attempt to hold the bourgeois world at bay, he flees the Protestant north for adventure in South America. The north for Mann always

\textsuperscript{22} As Herbert Lehnert suggests, Mann’s discussion of the alienation of the artist borrows from Nietzsche’s conception of the ‘Pathos of Distance’ (Lehnert, 2004: 45). His artists possess a sense of pride at being superior to the banal herd that is coupled with the anguish of isolation.

\textsuperscript{23} This motif is central to several of Mann’s earlier works especially \textit{The Joker} (1987) and \textit{Tristan} (1903).
symbolises the sense of order, duty and solid respectability of the German bourgeoisie while movement south reflects the lure of licentiousness and dissolution. Returning home after eight years abroad, his ‘whole appearance’ is said to now have ‘something English about it which somehow seemed appropriate’ (Mann, 1999: 216). Much to his family’s shame and dismay, he takes up with the town’s libertines. They are the irresponsible children of patrician families, a generation accustomed to affluence, who find the town’s stolid commercial ethos course and ignoble. He accepts a role in the firm but lacks any real affinity with his work:

Business is really a fine and gratifying calling… Respectful, satisfying, industrious and comfortable. I was really born to it… You come fresh into the office in the morning, and look through the paper, smoke, think about this and that, take some cognac, and then go to work. Come midday; you eat with your family, take a rest, then to work again. You write, on smooth good business paper, with a good pen… everything first class and in order… When you go home to supper, you feel thoroughly satisfied – satisfied in every limb. Even your hands.

(Mann, 1999: 222)

In contrast to his siblings, Christian has lost all meaningful connection with his cultural roots. Alienated from bourgeois life, he finds nothing in the world that can elicit a sense of conviction. His work is merely something to occupy nervous hands and a novel form of entertainment. Without coherent values or objectives, he aimlessly stumbles through life, trawling for and dissecting diverse experiences in search of new sensations. It is a search that leads him from youthful Romanticism to middle-aged debauchery and excess. His one abiding love, the theatre, is itself as much a relief from quotidian reality as a genuine interest. Lacking the will or discipline to move beyond more than dilettantish appreciation, he possesses none of the heightened aesthetic sensibility of Mann’s later artists. This earliest site of Buddenbrooks’ artistry remains more vaudevillian escapism then Wagnerian epiphany. His favourite song ‘that Maria’ celebrates a scandalous harlot, and his favourite tale is of his English idol Johnny Thunderstorm, who thumbs his nose at the establishment and is ‘never seen do a stroke of work’ (Mann, 1999: 225). Art, here, resonates as a sneer at conventional morality and a kind of sardonic revenge on life by its hopelessly incapable practitioners.

24 This tension is established in Mann’s own biography. His father was of Protestant north German stock while his mother was South American. ‘When I ask myself the hereditary origin of my characteristics I am fain to recall Goethe’s famous little verse and say that I too have from my father “des Lebens ernstes Führen”—the serious conduct of life—but from my mother the “Frohnatur”—the sensuous, artistic side’ (Mann, 1960: 3-4). This association of mixed parentage and artistic deviation appears most notably Buddenbrooks, Tonio Kröger and Death in Venice. The danger of the south is most readily discernible in Death in Venice where it is the locus of chthonic forces that threaten to destroy the bourgeois self.
After a few weeks, he tires of the office routine and spends increasing amounts of time carousing in clubs and the theatre. One evening, drinking at his favourite club, he incautiously remarks that ‘every business man is a swindler’ (Mann, 1999: 262). This irreverence is condemned by his peers; it threatens their mantle of respectability and hard won good conscience. They tacitly know not to probe their motives too deeply and have thereby successfully transitioned into the late bourgeois world. For his brother, the theatrics of this artist manqué are a constant source of embarrassment and cruel reminder of his own errant tendencies. As Christian ages, self-preoccupation degenerates into hypochondria. He is beset by a litany of ailments from insomnia to a ‘continuous indefinite ache’ down his ‘whole left side’ where ‘the nerves are all too short’ (1999: 332). Eventually he suffers hallucinations. In a final dissolute act, he marries a courtesan who steals his inheritance and has him committed to an asylum. After a life lived in protest against the absurdity of bourgeois convention, there is a kind of Foucauldian logic to this diagnosis of insanity.

As a character type, Christian has literary antecedence in the fin de siècle decadent movement. Even his name suggests an ironic counterpoint to John Bunyan’s pilgrim. Without moral conviction, ascetic discipline or a firm sense of self, he is highly impressionable and prone to wander from one activity to the next. He makes several ill-fated attempts to establish himself in business but cannot muster the requisite energy for protracted ventures. The strain of work exacerbates the ‘misery in his side’ and other ‘indefinable ills’ and inevitably compels him to ‘leave his post’ (Mann, 1999: 367). For the ascetic Protestant, work had strengthened character and sublimated desire but for this late ‘Christian’, incapable of focus and the deferment of gratification, it only exacerbates morbid tendencies.

In its final stage, Christian’s hedonistic lifestyle degenerates into an indiscriminate pursuit of sensations. Once directly gratified, his desires lead to boredom and leave him languorously mulling over the impressions they made. As his lassitude grows, he requires increasingly intense and protracted experiences to rekindle jaded appetites. All of his sensations are of equal merit: whether it is prostitutes in Hamburg, Swedish Punch that makes him feel ‘filthy… sickly and unclean’ or his ‘striking and unusual’ ailment, everything perverse or abnormal provides the sense of shock that compensates for his reduced capacity to feel pleasure (Mann, 1999: 440 & 532). These experiences are a long way from the romantic adventures of his youth. They are pursued less with enthusiasm than with a weary reflexivity.
It is a trajectory suggestive of Durkheim’s anomie. Without normative values and an ordered structure of repression and release, the intensity of desire that emerges with social deregulation eventually passes into weak-willed indifference.

Mann’s decadent type is nervous, debauched and morbidly obsessed with his physical and spiritual decline. For Mann, Christian embodies the potential dangers of turning away from the bourgeois life narrative. From the loss of moral restraint and firm attachment to the world, a decadent regression is established that leads from hedonism through hypochondria and neurosis to aboulia and ultimately madness. There is rancour and eventual tragic resignation in this position that is beyond Weber’s lukewarm ‘sensualists without spirit’ (Weber, 1992: 124). The world is not endured in mechanical passivity but hopelessly struggled against until the will grows tired. Against the romantic promise of freedom from constraint that continued to captivate the fin de siècle decadents, Mann maintains that unregulated desire doesn’t lead to liberation from staid convention, but rather to the suicidal despondency of Baudelaire’s ennui.

The life postures established in Tony, Thomas and Christian are brought into final relief with the death of their mother. At the wake of this last successful Buddenbrook, Christian announces his intention to wed the courtesan. Years of barely repressed enmity between Thomas and Christian finally erupt. Tony in her new role as family matriarch is a comically uncomprehending mediator between the warring factions. She implores the brothers to stop arguing with the recurrent interjection ‘Mother lying there in the next room’ (Mann, 1999: 466). It becomes a leitmotif throughout the scene that amplifies the death of the family. Thomas accuses Christian of being a shameless embarrassment with a ‘lack of feeling that borders on disease’ (1999: 466). Christian returns that Thomas is a self-righteous egotist ‘without pity, without love, without humility’ (1999: 468). Behind outward appearance, their spiritual affinity is confirmed by the acuity of their respective characterisations. They destroy each other. Christian abandons hope that religious compassion and familial love could ever surmount the brutal demands of bourgeois life. In turn, Thomas acknowledges he has become what he is only by keeping Christian and what he represents at bay. His life has been shaped more by his resistance to decadence than by any positive affinity with the values he embodies. At the end of the scene, all three postures are shown to be ineffectual responses to the lack of a vital culture: to follow Tony into the antiquarian is to become comically
Quixotic, to follow Thomas into irony is to suffer from Hamlet’s debilitating insight and to reject bourgeois society like Christian is to become inconsequential, isolated and neurotic.

In Thomas’ son, the ‘latecomer Hanno’, the process of decline is completed (Mann, 1964: xi). From the cradle he is sickly, effeminate and overly sensitive and therefore congenitally ill-equipped for bourgeois life. Forced by his father into the mercantile stream at school, he experiences the world as a Hobbesian nightmare. In Hanno, the artistic sensibility, repressed in Thomas and lacking direction in Christian finds pure expression. Typical of Mann’s artists, his aesthetic sense develops in tandem with physical frailty and social detachment. It weakens the will to live but it also brings refinement and depth of perception. While Thomas tries to draw him towards practical life he intuitively sees through his father’s mask to the tormented soul below:

> The little boy saw more than he should have… He saw not only the unerring charm which his father exercised upon everyone: he saw as well, with strange and anguished penetration; how cruelly hard it was upon him.

(Mann, 1999: 505)

To this hyper-sensitive child, the bourgeois world appears to be a horrible masquerade where suffering is promulgated as ‘an end in itself’ (Mann, 1999: 505). For Thomas, the idea of vocation had retained a symbolic importance, but for the thoroughly decadence latecomer it evokes only horror and disgust. Nauseated by his future prospects, Hanno’s sole joy is music. Music for Mann, especially Richard Wagner’s neo-Romanticism, is the most suspicious of arts; it is the most other-worldly, emotive and subversive to reason and the established moral order. For Hanno, Wagner’s operas elicit an orgiastic sensation akin to masturbation that gratifies his yearning for release in death. This music is the ideal medium for a life lived

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25 The morally corrosive effect of music is a recurrent theme throughout Mann’s career. See, for instance, Little Herr Freidemann (1897) where the physically deformed protagonist’s life is spent in the pursuit of culture as the sublimation for denied libido. His carefully constructed world is destroyed when he becomes infatuated with a socialite he is seated next to during a performance of Richard Wagner’s Lohengrin (1850). In Tristan (1903) the romantic heroism of Wagner’s Tristan and Isolde is juxtaposed with the pallid love affair between a dilettante writer and a sickly bourgeois woman that plays out in a sanatorium. The connection between decadence, physical infirmity, weak-willed craving and Wagnerian music is made explicit in The Blood of the Walsungs (1905). The son and daughter of a thoroughly decadent bourgeois family succumb to an incestuous relationship after seeing their favourite opera Tristan performed. As J. M. Hawes suggests, Wagner for Mann is virtually synonymous with decadence: ‘In Buddenbrooks Wagnerian music appears to be somehow analogous to the disease which kills off the last of the declining family; in Tristan the connection is again so intimate that it is by no means clear whether Wagner causes disease or vice-versa. The echoes of Nietzsche’s question are quite clear: ‘Is Wagner a man at all? Is he not, rather, an illness?’ (Hawes, 1993: 76).
detached from the world and in total service to the pleasure principle. Beyond self-gratification, he ‘can’t will anything’ and yearns ‘to sleep and never wake up’ (1999: 592). At the age of fifteen, he succumbs to typhoid fever, but his death is shown to be as much a product of failed will as it is of the disease itself.

Hanno’s premature death suggests that sensitivity and artistry can find no place in the late bourgeois world. The cruelty of this world is emphasised through a detailed depiction of a day in his life. At school, he is subject to authoritarian teachers and bullied and humiliated by classmates. Mann associates his artistic inclinations with femininity, sensitivity and passivity in contrast to the crude vitality of the other boys’ Prussian-masculine ethos. His school is depicted as a microcosm of the nascent social order; it stifles imagination and aesthetic sensibility and propagates rote conformity, a lack of sentimentality and ruthless competition.

This critique of the bourgeois order was a common theme in contemporary literature, with exemplars including Frank Wedekind’s Spring’s Awakening (1890-1891), Hermann Hesse’s Under the Wheel (1905), and Robert Musil's The Confusions of Young Törless (1906). In an era that had seen the emergence of psychoanalysis and growing attention paid to the importance of childhood, these works functioned as a scathing critique of the pathological consequences of purely commercial values on the human personality. Mann leaves his audience with an image of an era progressively divorcing itself from the affective values that had nurtured it. For Mann, the age of the Bürger had past and the modern world was now producing the crude, aggressive and purely self-interested bourgeoisie.

The Bourgeois

26 The estrangement of the artist from the world found its earliest influential account in Schiller’s On Naive and Sentimental Poetry (1795-6). Schiller introduced the dichotomy of the naïve pre-modern artist at home in the world and the modern sentimental artist who has become alienated from an immediate relationship with nature. Following this depiction of the sentimental type, the tension between artistic genius and the alienating banality of the modern world became a central motif of German Romanticism. The abiding power of this image is evidenced by Lukács’ quotation of Novalis at the beginning of his The Theory of the Novel: ‘philosophy is really homesickness,’ says Novalis: ‘it is the urge to be at home everywhere’ (Novalis as cited in Lukács, 1975: 29). As Lukács maintains: ‘A seemingly deliberate withdrawal from life was the price of the romantic art of living, but this was conscious only at the surface, only within the realm of psychology. The deep nature of this withdrawal and its complex relations were never understood by the Romantics themselves and therefore remained unresolved and devoid of any life-redeeming force. The actual reality of life vanished before their eyes and was replaced by another reality, the reality of poetry, of pure psyche. They created a homogeneous organic world unified within itself and identified it with the real world’ (Lukács, 1974: 50).
If the Buddenbrooks are Mann’s exemplar of the Bürgertum, in the Hagenströms he provides an ideal-type of the ‘hard Bürger’ or bourgeoisie that would come to replace them (Mann, 1983: 99). In contrast to the Buddenbrooks, who have centuries of tradition behind them, the Hagenströms are new to town and their history is unknown. Herman Hagenström, it is alluded to, has become a man of means through a ‘rich but doubtful marriage’ to a Jewish bride from Hamburg (1999: 47). As with Freytag, for the early Mann, ‘Jewishness’ connotes qualities alien to the German mode of life. The Hagenströms are widely disliked for their aggressive new ways. They are the parvenu social climbers who introduce a spirit of social mobility which grates against the order and propriety of Lübeck’s relatively static patriarchal society. The new spirit which animates commercial life is evident in the town’s perception of Herman Hagenström:

His [Herman Hagenström’s] light, large way of making money and spending it again differed fundamentally from the patient, persistent toil and inherited principles of his fellow merchants. This man stood on his own feet, free from the hindering fetters of tradition and ancestral piety; and all the old ways were foreign to him.

(Mann, 1999: 336)

This is contrasted with Thomas Buddenbrook who is respected not only for his business acumen but also for being a living embodiment of Lübeck’s proud commercial tradition:

People honoured in him the still unforgotten personality of his father, grandfather and great-grandfather… What distinguished him, even among his professional fellow citizens, was an unusual degree of formal culture, which wherever he went, aroused both wonder and respect in equal degrees.

(Mann, 1999: 336)

Herman Hagenström is an exemplar of the popular bourgeois stereotype: he is ‘uncommonly fat’, unattractive and dresses in a gaudy ‘cosmopolitan style’ (Mann, 1999: 483). Without moral compunction or aesthetic refinement, he is a habitual opportunist, shameless profiteer and amoral overseer of abstract business relations. Relishing the struggle of commercial life, the Hagenströms embody the hypertrophy of the Manchester ethos: civic roles and platitudes are pursued with the same ruthless vigour brought to the marketplace. Unhindered by tradition, they are pragmatic, unsentimental and progressive. In stark contrast to the venerable formalism of the Buddenbrooks’ house, they are the first in Lübeck to introduce gas lighting and maintain ‘a modern dwelling, not conforming to any set style of architecture… furnished
inside with every luxury and planned with the cleverest economy’ (1999: 336). Ideologically, the Hagenströms represent a comfortable materialism. They unashamedly acknowledge their love of money and the luxury and influence it can bestow. At home in the late bourgeois world as Johann Buddenbrook had been in his era, they accept bourgeois life unquestioningly and on its own terms. Life is ruthless and harsh but the market provides a channel for personal strength and many agreeable comforts. The Hagenströms enjoy life, as Herman is fond of saying, ‘and why shouldn’t we?’ (1999: 482).

Throughout the novel, the rise of the Hagenströms is primarily depicted through the eyes of the Buddenbrooks. Tony Buddenbrook calls them das Geschmeiß (scum, trash, or vermin). For the businessmen of the family, the Hagenströms are admonished for their unethical practices but grudgingly acknowledged for their business successes. As the novel progresses, the Hagenström’s marry into one of the established families in Lübeck and become ‘equal to the best in money and position’ (Mann, 1999: 482). At the end of the novel, with their purchase of the Buddenbrooks’ mansion, the Hagenströms announce their leadership of the new world and obtain ‘historic consecration’ (1999: 483).

Within a generation, the parvenu bourgeoisie have forced their way into the highest strata of Lübeck society. The Buddenbrooks perception of the Hagenströms is typical of the trajectory of what Max Scheler, following Nietzsche, described as bourgeois ressentiment (Scheler, 1961). Initially, the bourgeoisie’s desire for social and political empowerment leads to their resentment of the aristocracy. The bourgeois values of industry and thrift critique the established order by inverting the aristocratic values of leisure and consumption. As social leadership is consolidated, there is a tendency towards refinement and the aping of previously rejected values. Resentment is now transferred to those below in an attempt to establish distance and maintain privilege. In Buddenbrooks, the Hagenströms ascension is a dark mirror to the Buddenbrooks’ self-legitimations. With each success, the Hagenströms unabashed materialism strikes a nerve. It exposes the economic heart of the bürgerlich world that exists behind its ostensible tribute to higher values. In this light, the Buddenbrooks’ antipathy towards the Hagenströms is an unconscious attempt to disassociate themselves from their own base motives.27

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27 As Hugh Ridley suggests, despite the airs and graces of the Buddenbrook family, they are only removed by a couple of generations from the Hagenströms position: ‘Their [the Buddenbrooks] prosperity went back little further than war-profiteering in the Napoleonic period’ (Ridley, 1987: 19).
The end of the novel is uncompromisingly bleak. All of the male members of the family are dead or institutionalised and Tony is entombed within the family home, vainly attempting to conjure up a heroic past. Life has provided no meaningful answer to her innocent question ‘what comes next?’ Her faith in a divine and beneficent order, expressed so innocently in the opening scene, has finally been shaken by her family’s remorseless fate. A friend of the family attests that there is an afterlife in which she will be reunited with the family members that have fallen by the way. Tony however, responds:

‘Yes they say so. Oh, there are times… when that is no consolation, God forgive me! When one begins to doubt — doubt justice and goodness — and everything. Life crushes so much in us, it destroys so many of our beliefs! A reunion — if that were so.

(Mann, 1999: 604)

Whilst the novel closes with the possibility of redemption in the mould of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, the nostalgia and despair surrounding this tepid affirmation make it far from convincing.

**What Comes Next?**

Those who keep their ears close to the ticking heart of the times have an epoch-making discovery to report nowadays. The bourgeois way of life, they tell us is done for. It is hollowed out, finished, condemned to death, doomed, and destined to be devoured root and branch… a fundamental upheaval of our whole view of life, sped by all the moral, scientific, economic, political, technical, and artistic devices at the command of the twentieth century. It is progressing with such rapidity that our children, born before the war or after it, are actually already living in a new world and no longer know very much about the world from which we sprang.

(Mann, 1964: xvii-xviii)

In chronicling the decadence of his time, Mann employed the typically German contrast between early and late bourgeois epochs; between a period of religious, moral and commercial unity and the fragmented late capitalist world. As such, his thought shares in what Lukács has referred to as the ‘romantic-anti-capitalism’ that developed in the wake of
Marx and Nietzsche (Lukács as cited in Löwy, 1987: 17).²⁸ Mann’s generation inherited Marx’s critique of the capitalist economic order coupled with Nietzsche’s concerns with the cultural consequences of secularisation and the deification of the market. However, despite critical affinity, they lacked the teleological optimism of Marx or Nietzsche’s recourse to ‘aristocratic radicalism’ (Brandes, 1914).²⁹ Consequently, in general, they experienced their world as a reified and immutable social reality.³⁰ Many members of this generation sought to transcend the sterility of the contemporary climate by embracing aesthetic, religious or political absolutes. From the aesthetic retreat from the world of the George circle, to the fascination with Slavic mysticism and communism in Weber’s Heidelberg group, there was a desperate yearning for liberation from the stifling confines of the bourgeois world. Yet, for those unwilling or unable to make a leap of faith in disenchanted times, bourgeois life was seen as alienating and morally and spiritually exhausted, but it was to be endured in the absence of viable alternatives.

This mood of elegiac resignation informs the periods most widely read and focused studies of bourgeois culture. Max Weber’s The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism (1904-1905) and Werner Sombart’s The Bourgeoisie (1913) directly engaged with the idea of a fateful correlation between material and technological progress and moral and cultural decline. Abhorred by the ‘mechanised petrification’ and shallow materialism of their times, they searched for the animating spirit that had retreated from modern life (Weber, 2001:124).

²⁸ Franz Solms-Laubach in his extensive study of the development of the German sociological tradition writes: ‘This dialogue between Marx and Nietzsche… played an important part in the formation of early sociological thought in Germany and Austria where its leading exponents were trying to come to terms with the fundamental challenges these two thinkers had posed’ (Solms-Laubach, 2007: 4). This is particularly evident in Max Weber’s view of The Protestant Ethic as a cultural compliment to Marx’s historical materialism (Weber, 2001: 20-21). The influence of Marx and Nietzsche on Weber’s thought is evident in his declaration shortly before his death that: ‘The honesty of a present-day scholar, and above all a present-day philosopher, can be measured by his attitude to Nietzsche and Marx. Whoever does not admit that considerable parts of his own work could not have been carried out in the absence of the work of these two, only fools himself and others. The world in which we spiritually and intellectually live today is a world substantially shaped by Marx and Nietzsche’ (Weber as cited in Hennis, 1998). See also Hennis on Weber’s intellectual debt to Marx: ‘Weber never disputed the then unique fertility of Marx’s problematic. But he did not take up the prophetic vision that Marx believed followed from his own analyses. Weber’s analysis of capitalism is consequentially deeper than that of Marx; it considers the universal human perspective without, like Marx, becoming involved in desirabilities’ (Hennis, 1998: 155).

²⁹ The Danish literary critic George Brandes first used the term ‘aristocratic radicalism’ to characterise Nietzsche’s thought with particular reference to his celebration of great individuals and the doctrine of the Übermensch. It was an appellation Nietzsche wholeheartedly accepted. See (Brandes, 1914) and (Nietzsche, 1999: 283).

³⁰ This overarching impression in the thought of Simmel, Tönnies, Weber, Lukács and Troeltsch is meticulously documented in Harry Liebersohn’s Fate and Utopia in German Sociology (1990). In particular, Liebersohn suggests Simmel and Lukács exemplified the attempt to surmount the impasse of the reified bourgeois world through their respective commitments to socialism and communism (Liebersohn, 1990: 126-176).
Against the Marxist image of the rapacious and purely self-interested bourgeoisie, they stressed the religious and ethical dimensions that had shaped the early capitalist world.\footnote{As a self-acknowledged ‘burgher who’s gone astray’, Mann’s critique differs from the caustic attack on bourgeoisie morality that typifies other major nineteenth century literary figures like Dostoevsky, Balzac and Flaubert (Mann, 1998: 227). Mann suggests that it is his ironic attachment to his class that moves his literary pursuits beyond the one dimensionality of polemic: ‘I do not believe that form can develop at all without sympathy—pure negation produces flat caricature, instead he maintains that it was ‘the bourgeois man of business and accomplishment and my psychological-symbolic sympathy with him that prevented me from perceiving him as a completely repulsive type’ (Mann, 1983: 103). This identification with the bourgeoisie allows Mann to capture the problems faced by the bourgeois through their ‘reflexes in everyday life’ (Lukács, 1964: 15). As Lukács suggests, ‘Even in opposition Thomas Mann, the creator never parts company with the bourgeoisie. The extent of his influence reposes on this firm social basis. He is representative in the sense that he symbolises all that is best in the German bourgeoisie’ (Lukács, 1964: 15).}

These works are propelled by the nervous sense that bourgeois culture, despite its failings, had provided the last viable form of meaningful life for Western civilisation.\footnote{See, for instance, Weber’s identification as a late heir of bürgerlich culture. In an image akin to Mann’s sense of being a latecomer, Weber writes: ‘“We are epigones of a great age,’ … and the ‘stormy impulse of idealism’ has become impossible ‘through our clearer knowledge of the prosaic laws of social life’ (Weber as cited in Scaff, 1989: 24).} Like Mann, Weber and Sombart sought to understand the process of decay and thereby salvage what they could from the legacy of their ancestors.\footnote{In tracing the transition from the early to late capitalist world all three authors locate similar developments. While Sombart diverges in ultimate cause from Mann and Weber in highlighting the role of Catholicism and the Renaissance in the development of the modern capitalist type, his image of this type is similar to the other two. As Judith Marcuse suggests, Sombart’s typology of Old and New Bourgeoisie appears to be strongly indebted to Mann’s characterisation of the Buddenbrooks and the Hagenströms (Marcus, 1996). The link between Weber and Mann is more readily apparent. Harvey Goldman, in Max Weber and Thomas Mann: The Shaping of the Self (1988), traces strong parallels in the thought of Thomas Mann and Max Weber in relation to the Protestant notion of ‘calling’ and the formation of the bourgeois character type. As he suggests, ‘Early in their careers Max Weber and Thomas Mann discovered and analysed those pieces of their social and spiritual inheritance that they though remained valuable, strong, and significant… Ultimately they proposed their notions of the calling and personality to the world around them as the only hope for, and the only path to, living life with meaning in a time of failed social ideals, cultural disorientation and despair (Goldman, 1988: 1-2).}

For many of Mann’s generation, the bürgerlich-bourgeois antithesis captured the atmosphere of the period, the sense of an inevitable falling away from an ideal towards the soulless materialism of the market. This fatalistic dichotomy shaped their perceptions on the interrelation between industrialisation, capitalism, religion, culture and modern life. The anxieties engendered by these relations would increasingly find voice in the contrast between German Kultur against decadent Western Civilisation that dominated German intellectual discourse leading up to World War One. These dichotomies became analytical tools of protest against all that was rotten but inexpiable in late bourgeois culture. They were expressions of a pervading pessimism towards the future that culminated in Lukács’ despondent refrain ‘who will save us from Western civilisation?’ and the iron-clad fatalism of Oswald Spengler’s The Decline of the West (Lukács, 1910; Spengler, 1918).
The problems raised in *Buddenbrooks* set the stage for the remainder of this thesis. As Lukács would continue to insist well into the 1950s, Mann’s enduring relevance lay in his ability to capture the cultural and ideological evolution of the bourgeois cultural form:

Thomas Mann gives us a totality of the inner problems of contemporary bourgeois life… His problems in a modified form are those of millions of middle-class people, millions of human beings who have grown up and are living under the influence of a bourgeois outlook.

(Lukács 1955: 162-163)

In the middle of the twentieth century, these ‘problems’ found a new and compelling locus in the rising fortunes of the American middle class. Emerging out of what came to be referred to as the first ‘post-industrial society’, the American way of life was seen to be a harbinger of a fate that would be shared by the rest of the Western world (Bell, 1973). This American story will be the subject of the following two chapters.
4- Imagining Springfield: The American Middle Class

Why, it's a scrapbook of all your favourite Pleasantville memories….
Flash back to kinder, gentler times

(Television voiceover, Pleasantville)

Where in Leave it to Beaver land are you taking me?

(Bubbles, The Wire)

When America looks back at the 1950s, its most vivid and enduring memories are of the domestic comedies that proliferated throughout the decade (Spiegel, 2001).¹ They are memories of picture-perfect ranch houses on tree-lined suburban streets, sheltering straitlaced and cheerful nuclear families. Since the middle of the 1950s, shows like Father Knows Best and Leave it to Beaver have been perennial fixtures on commercial television. Domestic comedy has proven to be the most durable of all commercial genres (Marc, 1996: 11). These shows have been a source of boundless imitation, parody and allusion. In the process, they have virtually become shorthand for the nation’s collective memory. This enduring power has made them a recurrent site of ideological confrontation.² On the political right, they remain a symbol of wholesome American values, a reminder of what has since been lost to political liberalism and cultural relativism. It is this 1950s, as an ideal, that neo-conservative rhetoric

¹ Horace Newcomb in his seminal study TV: The Most Popular Art (1974) distinguishes between ‘situation comedy’ and ‘domestic comedy’. Situation comedies as exemplified by I Love Lucy, tend to focus less on domestic realism and more on farcical situations and physical comedy. Domestic comedy in contrast, focuses more on interpersonal problems that are resolved through communication and interaction rather than artifice. As a result, there is ‘more warmth, and a deeper sense of humanity… a richer variety of event, a consequent deepening of character, and a sense of seriousness’ (Newcomb, 1974: 43). Domestic comedies dominated 1950s television schedules and are the explicit focus of this chapter.

² As Mary Caputi suggests ‘The 1950s bristle with an array of ideological connotations, a swirl of aesthetic resonances, a battery of moral implications so highly charged and emotionally laden that any mention of the decade in the current context far exceeds literal, historical references’ (Caputi, 2005: 1).
has sought to resurrect. As Stephanie Coontz suggests, contemporary discourse over the American middle class is ‘often framed in terms of how many “Ozzie and Harriet” families are left in America’ (1992: 23).

From the political left, the 1950s are typically derided as a hotbed of repression; a fantasy constructed by the Culture Industry to mask economic and patriarchal interests (Edwards, 2007: 49-68). Leftist criticism often focuses on a lost generation of homemakers, surrounded by the latest in creature comforts, yet crippled by narrow gender roles and domestic ennui. A psychoanalytic lens is often applied to probe the repressed depths behind everyday exteriors. In these readings, the suburban norm is deemed pathological, an indicant of extreme repression. This is the message of Ira Levin’s bestselling novel The Stepford Wives (1972): the more normal you are the more you have to hide. This line of criticism typically suggests that only in the 1960s, in works like Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique (1962), were the systemic inequalities that lurked behind the ostensibly bright portraits of the 1950s redressed. Addressing this ideological quagmire, cultural historians have recently come to reappraise the 1950s. Where domestic comedies were once seen as shallow housing for bourgeois ideology, they have come to be seen as embattled sites that were already troubled by internal conflict (Coonz 1992; Havalovich, 1982; Jones, 1992; Leibman, 1995). As products of their time, domestic comedies like Father Knows Best express an array of countervailing ideals, beliefs and anxieties that are not reducible to ‘the dominant ideology of the corporate capitalist order’ (Hamamoto, 1989: 2).

Regardless of political persuasion, from the contemporary vantage point, the American 1950s and 1960s stand as the decades of the twentieth century with the sharpest thematic resonances (Marcus, 2004). The 1950s have become virtually synonymous with notions of stability, comfort and conformity. The 1960s, in contrast, evoke the sense of freedom that was embodied in the counter-culture’s rejection of the restraints of the nuclear family, middle-of-the-road liberalism, and corporate employment. It is the ideal-typical values in each of these periods that will occupy the next two chapters. The countervailing tendencies of the 1950s

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3 The influence of television representations in this image is evident, as David Halberstam suggests: ‘one reason that Americans as a people became nostalgic about the fifties more than twenty-five years later was not so much that life was better in the fifties (though in some ways it was), but because at the time it had been portrayed so idyllically on television’ (Halberstam, 1993: 514).

4 On a socio-economic level the hidden costs of the 1950s were becoming apparent by the end of the decade. These costs were most forcibly explored in John Kenneth Galbraith’s The Affluent Society (1958).
and 1960s established a series of dichotomous ideas over what constituted the good life: community/individualism, responsibility/freedom, order/excitement and simple pleasures/extravagance to name but a few. For many Americans, the 1950s were a period when the idea of what constituted America could still be contained in Norman Rockwell’s sugary weekly covers for *The Saturday Evening Post*. Behind their refugence, these images were as much sites of nostalgia as affirmations of the beneficent present. Throughout the 1950s, America experienced the greatest geographical, economic and cultural changes in a history already marked by restless progress. As witness and companion to these changes, television expressed the anxiety of movement as much as enthusiasm for the contemporary world. Behind their ostensible confidence in progress and presentation of a middle class with a strong sense of identity, 1950s domestic comedies are symptomatic of a nation reaching out to the new, but also requiring the order and stability of the familiar.

**The New Middle Class: A Topography.**

The middle-class ideal that emerged in the 1950s was shaped by specific geo-political and socio-economic circumstances. Emerging triumphantly from World War Two, America experienced a level of mass affluence unprecedented in world history. From 1945-1960, the GDP ballooned by 250% (Jones, 2011: 6). As a result, the median family income nearly doubled (Weir, 2007: 143). By the middle of the decade, *Fortune Magazine* was cheerfully reporting that 1.1 million American families were joining the middle class each year. By the end of the decade, almost two-thirds of the America population were identified as middle-class (Weir, 2007: 143). The sense of equality of opportunity that undergirds the America Dream has always militated against static class divisions. Americans have tended to been non-plutocratic, constitutionally averse to the aristocratic principle of hereditary entitlement. To an extent, before the 1950s, equality had always been more of an ideal than a pragmatic goal. However, by 1957, the editors of *U.S. News and World Report* were declaring that ‘never have so many people, anywhere, been so well off’ (as cited in Gillon, 2011: 72). Responding to the post-war economic boom, many social commentators suggested that traditional notions of class had become obsolete. America, they argued, was becoming a land of the middle class.⁵

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⁵ See, for instance, David Riesman’s insistence on the redundancy of ‘Marxist class-analysis’ in charting the problems of the times (Riesman, 2008: liv). The buoyant mood of the period is further evident in 1950s sociologists’ distance from the rhetoric of the 1930s social reformers. See, for example, Lewis Corey’s
Accompanying this shift was the development of the world’s first consumer society. As the wartime economy shifted focus towards domestic demand, a cornucopia of products flooded the market. Housing and commodities that in the early part of the century had only been affordable for a small elite, were increasingly available to the wider populace. Credit cards, shopping centres, television, a burgeoning leisure, hobby and do-it-yourself market—mainstays of contemporary middle-class culture—were all in a large part the products of 1950s affluence. After the depression of the thirties and the war-torn forties, Americans embraced the pleasures afforded by their new-found security and prosperity. The 1950s became a time of what David Riesman referred to as ‘innocent optimism’ (Riesman as cited in Wrong, 1998: 163) and C Wright Mills called ‘the American celebration’ (Mills, 1956: 25).

Central to this celebration was the rapid development of suburbia. On the back of the G. I. Bill of Rights, returning servicemen, and later the wider community, were afforded government backed low-interest housing loans.6 Capitalising on rising demand, by the early 1950s new suburban developments in the mould of the Levittown developments on Long Island were being established all over the country. For many of the upwardly mobile, the great American cities once lauded as melting pots of culture and energy were readily abandoned for suburbs with pastoral names like Park Forest, Lakewood and Crestwood Heights.7 Throughout the 1950s, these suburbs grew fifteen times faster than the rest of the country (Jones, 1992: 88). This mass migration was further swelled by a doubling in car ownership and the extensive development of road networks making a suburban lifestyle and insistence in The Decline of American Capitalism (1934) that ‘American class stratification is now definite and final’ (Corey, 1934: 563). It is only in the 1960s, in books like Michael Harrington’s The Other America (1962), that poverty as an existent social condition was rediscovered by the American middle class. As T. B. Bottomore suggests: ‘Instead of the opposition between major classes in political struggle it was now the manifestation of the social prestige in the local community, evaluated in terms of consumption patterns and styles of life, or occupational prestige and individual mobility through the educational system, which absorbed the sociologists. The underlying conception was that of America as ‘a middle-class society in which some people were simply more middle-class than others’ (as cited in Hamamoto, 1989: 57).

6 For an extended analysis of the relationship between the G. I. Bill and middle-class mobility see Michael J. Bennett’s When Dreams Came True: The G.I Bill and the Making of Modern America (1996). Bennet suggests that the G. I. Bill led to ‘a social revolution even greater than Henry Ford's’ (1996: 25). Americans in the 1950s were ‘making themselves into a new people in a social culture defined, above all, by home ownership in the suburbs. That was America's real New Frontier, settled fifty-five years after the old frontier was closed in 1890’ (1996: 279).

7 As Dolores Hayden explores in Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing Work and Family Life: ‘the dream house replaced the ideal city as the spatial representation of American hopes for the good life’ (Hayden, 2002: 55).
city employment a viable and attractive option. In the first half of the twentieth century, home-ownership had remained largely the province of affluent middle and upper-middle-class families. Throughout the 1950s, the mass-produced suburbs made home-ownership—a seminal indicator of middle-class status—a realisable goal for most middle-class and many working-class American families for the first time in American history (Jurca, 2001: 134).

The result was the creation of a sense of economic vitality and confidence in upward mobility. As the decade progressed, the rise of suburbia was iconographical confirmation of a nation on the move. Those who had made it to the suburbs could bask in the congratulatory images provided on television, and those that hadn’t were buoyed by the reasonable expectation that they would soon arrive. As one contemporary advertisement announced, it was a time when you could ‘live your dreams and meet your budget’ (Jones, 1992: 89).

Central to this dream was the near homogenous vision of the American ideal provided by the government, industry, advertisers and the media. From its cradle, mass culture screamed that the good life is American, suburban and middle-class. As social critic William Whyte noted:

For the younger couples, there has been an almost unbroken momentum; they came to adolescence at a time of rising hope, and throughout their early adult years they have known nothing but constantly increasing prosperity, personal as well as general. Suburbia has further confirmed them in their optimism. Here they are surrounded by others like themselves—too young to have failed.

(Whyte, 1956: 353)

While the 1950s witnessed the greatest socio-economic transformation in American history, they were also a period of cultural conservatism. Since the time of the Founding Fathers, a belief in ‘manifest destiny’ had galvanised the American sense of purpose. Throughout the 1950s, Cold War tension between America and the USSR lent further clarity to American self-definition. The Manichean politics of the post-war world shifted political focus from domestic criticism to external threats. Intellectuals no longer posited viable alternatives to the

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8 The negative appraisals of suburbia will be addressed in the next chapter. In the 1950s there was a sharp divide between popular culture’s representation of the suburbs and the response of intellectuals. As John Hartly suggests: ‘scholars rarely venture into suburbia except to pathologize it’ (as cited in Spiegel, 2001).

9 See, for instance, Herman Melville’s declaration in White Jacket (1850): ‘We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world…God has predestinated, mankind expects great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls…And let us always remember that with ourselves, almost for the first time in the history of the earth, national selfishness is unbounded philanthropy, for we cannot do a good to America but we give alms to the world’ (Melville as cited in Schlesinger, 1999: 15).
incumbent system, instead they talked of the ‘end of ideology’ and the drift to the ‘vital centre’ (Bell, 1960; Schlesinger, 1949). With the declining pertinence of the ideological left, capitalism was widely lauded as a panacea. Popular expressions like ‘caring capitalism’, ‘the people’s capitalism’ and ‘abundance for all’ expressed widespread belief in the beneficence of the American system (Miller & Novak, 1977: 106-126). Politically, this centrist conservatism was embodied in President Eisenhower: a plain talking, no-nonsense figure and fatherly presence for comfortable times. Even religion was swept up in the American celebration. Will Herberg in Protestant—Catholic—Jew (1955) argued that there had been a post-war blurring of denominational boundaries. Americanisation had seen traditional religious differences superseded by centrist compromise. America, he suggested, had a “common religion” and that “religion” is the system familiarly known as the American Way of Life’ (Herberg, 1955: 75).

Despite this general enthusiasm, the most influential social critics of the period expressed trepidation over this emergent affluent society. David Riesman’s The Lonely Crowd (1950) and William Whyte’s Organisation Man (1956) argued there had been a fundamental shift in American character from a psychology of scarcity to one of abundance. They charted a movement away from America’s ‘inner-directed’ Protestant bourgeois tradition to an emergent ‘other-directed’ middle class that relied more upon peer recognition for its sense of meaning and identity than any inner centre of gravity. At the turn of the century, Weber had found the purest expression of the Protestant Ethic in America. By mid-century, the Protestant Ethic was being used as shorthand for everything that was feared to have retreated from contemporary American life. Riesman and Whyte were too pragmatic to wish for a return to the rugged individualism of the nineteenth century, yet they worried about what the decline of traditionally valuable character traits like independence, enterprise, competitiveness and thrift portended. They sought answers through an analysis of the emergent realities of American society: the bureaucratisation, mass-production, mass-consumption and burgeoning middle class that found their nexus in suburbia as a way of life.

Whyte warned that a ‘social ethic’ which ‘makes morally legitimate the pressure of society against the individual’ had been uncritically absorbed by the post-war middle class (Whyte, 1956: 7). In essence, this new ethic was a functionalist deification of modern American society. The social ethic posited that the individual ‘exists as a unit of society’, the asocial life is meaningless, ‘belongingness’ is ‘the ultimate need of the individual’, and the group is the
font of all creativity (1956: 12). Under this ideology, conflicts between the individual and society were interpreted as ‘misunderstandings’ and ‘breakdowns in communication’ (1956: 7). For Whyte and Riesman, this was a form of bureaucratic levelling. Stressing togetherness, the social ethic valued the mediocre team player over the solitary genius and unquestioning obedience over critical and possibly fruitful dissent. On a cultural level, the emergence of this ethic had been accompanied by a change in role models. In film, television and popular novels, Horatio Alger types, who reached the heights of success from humble beginnings, were being succeeded by heroes that no long strove for the top but sought comfort and security within the corporate hierarchy (Long, 1985: 63-90). Writing in what he believed was the twilight of American individualism, Whyte bemoaned the fact that the middle class had ‘left home spiritually, as well as physically, to take the vows of organisational life, and it is they who are the mind and soul of our great self-perpetuating institutions… it is their values which will set the American temper’ (Whyte, 1956: 8).

Riesman and Whyte detected the same emphasis on group adjustment in the private life of the middle class. They thought that the suburban communities depicted by industry, advertisers and the media distorted reality. The real consequence of upward mobility had been a loss of the generational ties to place, traditions and extended kinship relations that were requisite for the formation of a strong and independent character. These intermediary associations functioned as enclaves where idiosyncrasies and personal preferences could be cultivated away from the beguiling homogeneity of mass-society. Without them, individuals were directly at the mercy of the collectivist influences of the mass-media and peer groups. In Riesman’s evocative analogy, inner-directed types had possessed a gyroscope of established values and convictions that steered them through the vicissitudes of life. In contrast, other-directed individuals were equipped with a radar set, tuned to receive signals from the shifting standards and expectations of their peers. Riesman believed the result was a diffuse but constant anxiety that arose from living for the approval of others.

At the heart of Riesman and Whyte’s thought was an attempt to grapple with the consequence of affluence. They sought to trace the cultural, moral and psychological ramifications of the shift from production to consumption, from scarcity to abundance and from the idealisation of work to the cultivation of leisure. In line with the majority of the intellectuals of their generation, they accepted the incumbent system as both intractable and advantageous, yet they were troubled by the possibility of establishing a viable moral framework for the new
American middle class. They believed that the tastes propounded by the mass media and the peer group were too shallow and ephemeral to provide an effective substitute for the firmly held values that had nurtured inner-directed character. For the other-directed suburbanites, the effect of peer tastes was a reluctance to cultivate serious and protracted interests. To commit too heavily to something was to run the risk of being stranded when the winds of popular opinion changed. The idea was to feel your way towards the meridian of popular taste. At the beginning of the century, Thomas Veblen had suggested the parvenu bourgeoisie were characterised by their conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1979). By mid-century, the goal Whyte declared was ‘not to keep up with the Joneses’ but ‘to keep down with them’ (Whyte, 1956: 288).

Against the tide of liberal optimism, Riesman and Whyte maintained that whilst living standards were being raised, cultural standards were being reduced to the lowest common denominator. They cited a wide range of cultural texts that they saw as little more than hackneyed renditions of populist sentiments. Where these texts celebrated progress, they saw a vulgar materialism, conformity and smug satisfaction with present circumstance. They believed the mass media and peer group encouraged herd-like behaviour that cut tall poppies down to size and ‘eliminated or repressed all knobby idiosyncrasies’ (Riesman, 1965: 72). Their 1950s suburbanite was a distant heir of Nietzsche’s last man, who lived without strong convictions, passions and goals. The lack of vigour in either belief or action, suggested that in this period of affluence, Americans had lost contact with the values that had made them great. They had become overly-socialised suburbanites, obsessed with creature comfort and security, and morally and politically drab conformists.

**Father Knows Best?**

The story of the suburban middle class is intimately linked to the emergence of television. Up until the 1940s, cinema had maintained a cultural pre-eminence in America. But as the old studio system collapsed under the weight of federal antitrust laws and the aggressive rise of television, the influence of film began to wane. By the mid-1950s weekly attendance was less than half the 85-90 million viewers that had gone to the movies in 1947 (Nye, 1970: 384). From the 1950s onwards, box office receipts would provide only a skewed indication of popular tastes. The dominance of Disney films and romantic comedies was a consequence of
shifting demographics. The cinemas had not moved with their traditional audience to the suburbs. They remained behind in the urban centres, increasingly becoming a province of the young. Meanwhile, from within the suburban home, television gained a hold over the wider middle class.

Television had existed since the 1930s, but it was only in the post-war economy that a sharp rise in sales, and the accompanying broadcaster and advertiser attention, saw it cement its place as the dominant cultural medium. In 1950, only 9% of American families owned a television. Throughout the following decade over 6,300,000 units were sold each year. By 1960, television was being broadcast into 90% of American homes (Spiegel, 2001: 33; Pondillo, 2010: 17). And these televisions were being used, with the average American watching about five hours a day (Spiegel, 2001: 33). The rise of television was soon met by critical backlash. By 1961, the head of the Federal Communications Commission declared that television had become:

A vast wasteland… You will see a procession of game shows, violence, audience participation shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families… And endlessly, commercials—many screaming, cajoling, and offending.

(Barnouw 1975, 300)

Yet in its infancy, television was widely seen to herald the dawn of a cultural Golden Age. As early as the 1940s, glowing appraisals of new medium emerged. Lee De Forrest, in Television Today and Tomorrow (1942), suggested, with quasi-biblical overtones, that television would inaugurate an era in which:

A population which once more centres its interest in the home will inherit the earth, and find it good. It will be a maturer population, with hours for leisure in small homes, away from today's crowded apartments. Into such a picture ideally adapted to the benefits and physical limitations of television, this new magic will enter and become a vital element of the daily life. This new leisure, more wisely used, welcoming the gifts, entertaining, cultural, educational, which radio and television will bestow, shall eventually produce new outlooks on life, and new and more understanding attitudes toward living.

(De Forrest as cited in Newcomb, 1974: 5)

De Forrest was one amongst a chorus of visionaries who imagined the small screen bringing Shakespeare and Beethoven into the family home. As the motto of the production company
that produced *Father Knows Best* declared, it would provide ‘Art for the masses’. At the same time, complementing wider socio-economic transformations, television was to contribute to the homogenisation of American culture. If industry was to provide the cars, cheap housing and cornucopia of commodities that fuelled the American Dream, television was to be its didactic and integrative mechanism. The President of NBC—the network that aired *Father Knows Best*—exemplified this ideal in his insistence that ‘characters will serve to illuminate the problems of our times and our fundamental beliefs’ (Weaver, 1954: 91). These shows, he maintained, will detail ‘the art of living itself’ (1954: 91). Following on from these sentiments, there was a cross-network consensus in early television representations of suburbia. The creators of shows like *Father Knows Best* believed that they were helping to shape a unified culture that would diminish geographic, ethnic and especially class differentiations within American society.10

Yet despite optimism over the didactic potential of television, the medium had emerged in a period of widespread concern over the negative portrayal of men in popular culture. Philip Wylie’s *A Generation of Vipers* (1942) had sparked fears over the tyranny of American women over their meek and ineffectual husbands. Since the depression era, popular culture had perhaps unwittingly contributed to these fears. The thirties had seen the emergence in comics (Dagwood and Blondie) and on radio (Fibber McGee) of the male bumbler as an archetype. Dull witted and incompetent, the bumbler was the butt of every joke. Radio and early television had continued to work loosely within this formula: the bumbler does something stupid which leads to a comedic situation that is ultimately resolved by his long suffering but dedicated wife. In a scathing review of early television, Bill Gale wrote in *The American Mercury* (1953) of the ‘grotesque burlesque of the American male animal’ (1953: 37). Father, another critic bemoaned, was ‘the mouse of the house—a bumbling, well-meaning idiot who is nothing but putty in the hands of his wife and family’ (Daddy with a Difference, 1954: 83).

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10 As Robert Fishman suggests, a consensual view of the world was established by television and suburbia in the 1950s: ‘For television, the decentralized audience is the ideal audience, the perfect consumers of the standardised products that advertisements offer. In return, television has glorified the single family house as the standard American home, enshrined the low density neighbourhood, and (perhaps not coincidentally) has provided an unrelentingly negative picture of the city as the haven of crime and deviance’ (Fishman: 1989: 202).
As a formula, the male bumbler was relegated throughout the 1950s to working-class comedies like *The Life of Riley* (1949-1958) and *The Honeymooners* (1955-1956). The chaos and confusion caused by Chester Riley and Ralph Kramden’s frustrated scheming became a counterfoil to the serene middle-class vistas that would come to dominate television. Riley and Kramden, in occupation and location, were unmistakably working-class. They were emotionally volatile, scheming, irresponsible and immature, in opposition to the prudence, responsibility and solid industry that typified televisual representations of the middle class. At the heart of this difference was an association of social position with personal character. Perhaps the central message of *The Life of Riley* and *The Honeymooners* was a reiteration of the Horatio Alger myth. In episode after episode, Kramden and Riley devised hair-brained schemes to strike it rich only to fail spectacularly. These were comedies of social mobility. What the bumbler aspired to was the leafy suburban streets and domestic contentment of mainstay television families. His failure was a negative exposition on the consequences of working-class behaviour. The overarching moral was Protestant: middle-class virtue alone would open the gate to happiness and prosperity.

By the mid-1950s, there was a decisive shift in the depiction of family life on television. Shows like *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960), *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963), *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-1963) and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-1966) provided idealised portraits of American life in the age of abundance. Against intellectual and high culture attacks on middle-class kitsch, these shows located suburbia as the new American heartland. A large part of their appeal lay in their commitment to ordinary life. They captured the sentimental side of their audience, the deeper attachments that lay behind ostensibly consumerist values and choices. In presenting their everyday worlds, these shows were unapologetically didactic. Episodes functioned as contemporary morality plays instructing a generation of new suburbanites on correct modes of behaviour. Each week, they pitted the wholesome American family against the vicissitudes of modern life. It was a one-sided contest. As the new consumer society began to emerge, these shows insisted that anomic tendencies towards greed and avarice could be restrained through an ongoing commitment to traditional values. The sagacious parents and wide-eyed children that populated the genre

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11 The working-class man as an ineffectual bumbler has been a recurrent cultural type throughout the history of domestic and situation comedies. For an extended discussion of the evolution of the bumbler from the 1950s to its current exemplar, Homer Simpson, see Richard Butsch’s *Five Decades and Three Hundred Sitcoms About Class and Gender* (Butsch, 2005: 111-135).
were perfect vehicles for this end. From the paternal home the children would make forays into the modern world, testing inherited wisdom, only to find out that the old ways were still the best. Modernity played out slowly in television’s suburbia. In a period marked by rapid change, the dominant message was that the particulars may have changed—the cars, the clothes and the music—but the essentials remained the same.

Often referred to as ‘the original family comedy’, *Father Knows Best* began as an NBC radio series in 1949. After four years on radio, the series commenced its television run in 1954. The program centred on the lives of the Andersons: mid-forties parents Jim and Margaret and their children, 17 year old Betty (Princess), 13 year old Jim Jr. (Bud) and 8 year old Kathy (Kitten). As an ideal-type, the Anderson family is presented at the height of its powers. The children have yet to start out on their own, and family members are neither enfeebled by age, nor subject to the demands of infancy. The broad age range of the children also allowed for a variety of plots and resolutions. In the process, the idealised nuclear family was shown to be able to solve the problems that arise at all of life’s junctures. On radio, the series was entitled ‘Father Knows Best?’ and there were residuals of the bumbling father format. Jim Anderson was prone to moments of confusion and impulsiveness. However, with the transition to television, the role of the father was established beyond doubt. The ironic question mark was stripped from the title and a patriarchal chain of command reinforced: from the father in heaven, through beneficent social institutions to the unimpeachable father of the home – Jim Anderson.

Initially, ratings were poor. The show was placed in the adult 10 p.m. timeslot and cancelled after one season. But more than twenty thousand letters of protest from viewers prompted its reinstatement in the 8.30 p.m. family timeslot. For the rest of the decade it remained the most popular domestic comedy, peaking as the sixth most popular television show in the 1960 Nielson polls. From the outset, *Father Knows Best* was lauded for a verisimilitude that restored respectability to fatherhood (Rhodes, 1965). As television critic John Crosby glowingly announced, Jim Anderson was ‘the first intelligent father permitted on radio or television since they invented the thing’ (as cited in Eddy, 1957: 29). Critical acclaim was soon followed by industry, community and government awards.12 While its strong ratings and

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12 Throughout its run, *Father Knows Best* received a wide range of awards including six Emmys. In its first year it won the Sylvania award for Outstanding Family Entertainment. In 1958 Robert Young made over twenty
positive critical appraisal justify attention, the show also established the moral and aesthetic standards of the domestic comedy genre. From its 1950s imitators to 1980s hits like *Family Ties* (1982-1989) and *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), and more recent ratings leaders like *Modern Family* (2009-present), *Father Knows Best* has left a lasting stamp on American popular culture.

At its heart, *Father Knows Best* participates in an enduring tension in American culture between two myths. The Horatio Alger myth is a secular rearticulation of the Protestant Ethic that frames the American Dream as a rags-to-riches story. It is a confident aspirational myth that stresses independence, initiative and progress. The second is a countervailing and somewhat compensatory myth of the idyllic small town. This myth appeals to a desire for roots, stability and intimacy. The Horatio Alger hero rises out of the backwater to achieve fortune and success in the big city. In contrast, the small-town hero rejects external lures and recommits to his community. In the small town tradition, the desire for movement and progress is supplanted by a discovery of what one already has. These two myths have waxed and waned in America popular culture since at least the middle of the nineteenth century. Starting in the 1940s, with a cluster of romantic films including *Our Town* (1940), *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), *Meet me in St Louis* (1945), and *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946) there is a growing emphasis on the small-town myth in American popular culture. The towns these films depicted were romantic Gemeinschaften: tightly woven communities, with well-established religious and civic institutions and a socially embedded economy. All of these films looked back nostalgically to the turn of the century as an age of innocence and ideal community. Their small towns were mythic repositories for everything that was felt to have been lost in modern life.

Drawing from this small town tradition, *Father Knows Best*’s Springfield, *Leave it to Beaver*’s Mayfield, and *The Donna Reed Show*’s Hilldale are deliberately ambiguous in their location. On one level they reflect the homogeneity of the newly developed suburbs. They are populated by almost identical nuclear families with similar jobs, income and interests. At the

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**personal appearances** ‘collecting prizes such as the Mt Sinai Father of the Year Award and the Safety Council Award’ (Lieberman, 1995: 71).

13 In all of these films business dealings are personalised. Customers are typically referred to by their first names and there is an intersection between social and commercial life. This overly romanticised portrait of small-town life is evident in *It’s a Wonderful Life* when George Bailey the local Building and Loans Company manager declares: ‘You don’t have to sign anything; I know you, you pay it when you can.’
same time they evoke small town life. Behind their pristine and homogenous exteriors lies the emotional intimacy and shared history of a vital moral community. Here they are more like the romantic visions of Frank Capra or Norman Rockwell than contemporary realities. Scott Donaldson, in *The Suburban Myth* (1969), suggests that the suburban ideal reconciled the American paradox of the continued ‘worship of rural, countrified life’ in a nation ‘where the pull of progress has created an unmistakably urban civilization’ (Donaldson, 1969: 24).

Mythically, suburbia came to ‘represent the best of both worlds’ preserving ‘rural values in an urbanizing world’ and enabling ‘the individual to pursue wealth while retaining the amenities of country life’ (1969: 24). This desire for a harmonious blending of the modern and the traditional is evident in the choice of setting for *Father Knows Best*. There are thirty-four places named Springfield in the USA. The creators of the show—as Matt Groening would forty years later in *The Simpsons* (1989-present)—used the ubiquity of Springfield as a symbol of anywhere USA. In the process, the series entrenched itself in the myth of America as a nation of small towns.

Following small-town conventions, the domestic comedies of the 1950s typically portrayed the city in mildly noirish tropes.\(^\text{14}\) The bright lights, sleeplessness and constant flux of the city is juxtaposed to the organic cycle of day and night that establishes the rhythm of suburbia.\(^\text{15}\) For the wide-eyed teenager, the city is a place where dreams come true, a site of luxury, romance and extravagance. For those who have seen more of life, the city is also home to licentiousness, competition and estrangement. Beyond the glitter and ostentation of the city, *Father Knows Best* insists that suburbia is the place where real living occurs. As a whole, domestic comedies reject the etymology of ‘suburb’ as a place that is culturally and economically inferior to the city. Despite this insistence, oppositions never develop into dichotomies. The entire social order is held to be too benevolent for a thoroughly negative image of the city ever to emerge.

In the *Father Knows Best* episode ‘A Country Cousin’, the function of suburbia is made explicit. Cousin Millicent visits the ‘big city’ for the first time. She is archetypally country:

\(^{14}\) The exemplar is the contrast between the utopic Bedford Falls and the dystopic Pottersville in Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946).

\(^{15}\) In *Father Knows Best* this contrast emerge particularly in the portrayal of New York. See, for instance, the episodes ‘The Family go to New York’ and ‘It’s a Small World’. As Jim Anderson suggests: ‘New York is a big city Margaret, its full of traps and all sorts of things’.
simply dressed, plainly spoken and possessed of an innocence and homespun virtue. Despite Millicent’s good nature, the Anderson’s fashion-conscious daughter Betty sees only ‘a simple soul from the ragged edge of the Corn Belt’. The moral of the episode is established in Millicent’s description of Springfield as ‘a big city’. It is the tendency towards snobbery, materialism and self-obsession of the ‘big city’ that threatens to undermine the suburban ethos. Throughout the episode, Millicent’s good-natured innocence functions as a counterfoil to Betty’s rising levels of selfishness and petty vindictiveness. The resolution is typical of the series. Betty learns the importance of honesty and integrity, values that remain present behind modern trappings, and Millicent receives a suburban makeover and her long awaited social debut. In the concluding equanimity, the city-suburb-country relationship is restored. Suburbia is re-established as a Golden Mean between the sophistication and superficiality of the city, and the honesty and naivety of country life.

From this mediatory position, the suburbs function as an anchor against the restless spirit of modernity. In ‘Betty’s Crusade’, a rundown café—the social hub for local university students—is to be torn down to make way for a new office building. Hanno, the owner of the café, is a poor businessman more prone to quoting Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau than Benjamin Franklin. He is a recurring type in the series: the innocent whose untempered idealism and selflessness make him ill-suited to the demands of the modern world. These characters typically serve as vehicles for illustrating the sentimental side of this way of life. They are the helpless in need of protection and guidance by the gentle hand of the middle class. The plot develops when Betty and her friends discover Jim’s insurance company is planning to use the café site for a new office building. In the ensuing conflict, big-business rationalism clashes with suburban sentiment. The resolution is achieved when Jim realises the importance of the café to the local community. In a pastiche of the final scene of It’s a Wonderful Life, the community band together in song and spirit to renovate the café. Jim sends a telegram to his company suggesting that to avoid public backlash they should find another site.

Ultimately, big business remains blind to sentiment and only comprehends the situation once transposed into quantifiable economic terms. The episode’s message is inconclusive. Behind the sentimentality of the closing scene, there is a sense that modernisation is inevitable and ultimately desirable but that an active citizenry will ensure its slow and cautious progress. The elision of Jim’s company’s response casts doubt on future mediations between business
and local community. Those who receive Jim’s telegram remain faceless and unknown. The result is a kind of romantic stasis where wider questions of socio-economic development are never followed to their logical conclusion.

In the episode ‘Lesson in Civics’, a venerable town hall is to be demolished to make way for a new freeway. Jim is incensed: ‘I believe in progress but I also believe in sentiment. I think it is a crime to destroy something that represents tradition and history as the old meeting hall does.’ He bitterly reproaches the town’s mayor for supporting the project. Throughout the episode, the PTA, Chamber of Commerce, Church and other civic groups are all shown to be integral to the proper functioning of democracy. The episode concludes with the mayor, swayed by public sentiment, commissioning a memorial park for the hall. Government officials are depicted as neither corrupt, nor self-interested, just over-burdened and often lacking a personal relationship to community issues. The lesson in civics is that ‘you get the government you deserve’. Consequently, in Father Knows Best, there is an idealisation of small government and grassroots political processes that extends from knowing your local mayor to being able to write a letter to the President.

On television, suburbia is as much a mood and ethos as it is a geographical designation. For the post-war middle class, moving to the suburbs was a statement of the intention to settle down and establish roots. It was an endorsement of family life and civic participation in contrast to the career-focused individualism of the city. Home ownership also indicated that a family was not only financially well-off but also stable and dependable (Palen, 1995: 70). Ideologically, suburbia followed in the tradition of Jeffersonian republicanism with the belief that private property develops the requisite social, moral and political attributes of a good citizenry. It was a vision of life that echoed Benjamin Franklin’s maxim: ‘when each of us sweeps in front of his own cottage there will be order in the whole world’ (Benjamin Franklin as cited in Ossowska,1986: 93).

In 1958, the U. S. Treasury Department commissioned an episode of Father Knows Best to be shown to school, church and community groups. Entitled ‘Twenty-Four Hours in Tyrant Land’, it was a testament to America’s growing identification with the Andersons. The episode begins with Jim volunteering to run the local Savings Bond campaign. Attempting to secure the family’s help, he rhapsodises on the harmony of national and self-interest: the bonds strengthen the nation and are a secure and profitable investment. However, the
children, unaccustomed to less secure and affluent times, remain indifferent. Jim and Margaret are appalled. To teach their children the error of their ways, they transform the perfect American home into a mock totalitarian state. Private lives and property are dissolved before the children readily capitulate under such repressive conditions. With renewed appreciation for American life, they eagerly lend themselves to the Bonds campaign. The show ends with a return to domestic bliss before, breaking character, Robert Young and Jane Wyatt (Jim and Margaret) beseech the audience to buy bonds and support the American way of life. The urgency of the message coupled with its domestic staging suggests the moral and political importance attached to the home. Private property functions as an impetus towards personal responsibility and as a bulwark against Communism. As William Levitt, the creator of the earliest mass suburban developments expressed it: ‘no man who owns his own house and lot can be a Communist. He has too much to do’ (Levitt as cited in Whitfield, 1996: 73).

The episode eerily presaged the Nixon-Khrushchev ‘kitchen debate’ of the following year. In the Summer of 1959, then Vice-President Richard Nixon led an American delegation to a Moscow trade fair. Their showpiece was a full-scale replica of the modern American home complete with the latest domestic appliances. Whilst touring the home, the spokesmen for Communism and Capitalism jousted over the merits of their respective societies. Khrushchev derided a free-market economy that incites demand and produces housing and goods that are either shoddy or frivolous. The result he suggested sardonically was meaningless consumerism: ‘Don’t you have a machine that puts food in the mouth and pushes it down?’ he asked (Khrushchev as cited in Marling, 2002: 107). Nixon retorted that the American home serviced universal human aspirations for comfort and security. He continued by insisting that the display home and its furnishings were now affordable for the average American worker. America worked, Nixon told the Russians, because ‘44 million families in America owned 56 million cars, 50 million television sets, 143 million radio sets and… 31 million of those families owned their own homes (Nixon, 1962: 280). Through the display, Nixon articulated an image of the good life as one where well-paid male breadwinners and their homemaker wives shared in the leisure, privacy and convenience of the modern American home. Beyond political rhetoric and military and economic might, America was legitimated through widespread access to this ideal. The American home lay at the heart of post-war American identity. It was a showcase for the American Dream and the system that had made it possible.
This idealisation of the home is illustrated in Father Knows Best in a credits sequence that established the conventions for all the domestic comedies that followed. The show opens with a tightly framed shot of a two-story ranch house situated behind a white picket fence. A vine trellised veranda and the mature trees flanking the house root it as an established way of life. The bucolic aspect of suburbia is emphasised: the house is harmoniously integrated into the landscape, its neo-colonial lines opposed to the modernist aesthetic that prevailed in the cities. The absence of neighbouring houses is further suggestive of an important aspect of the ideal. Home is an oasis away from the congestion of the city. This is a lifestyle built upon a degree of affluence and security that allows for the cultivation of personal space in opposition to the claustrophobic and rundown urban environments of working-class comedies like The Honeymooners. When working-class homes are depicted in Father Knows Best, they are typically associated with pressing economic demands. Husbands are either away at work or the public and private spheres have not been effectively delineated. The working-class home is often adjoined to the workplace or the site of cottage-industry economics.

Following the establishing shot of the house the camera cuts to the interior. Dressed in a suit and tie, Jim Anderson prepares to leave for work. Margaret hands Jim his briefcase: a symbol of an authority derived from the public sphere that extends into the home. A grandfather clock behind Jim shows the time to be nearly 8.30 a.m. The venerable timepiece evokes an older more leisurely sense of time before the Taylorist imperatives of modern industry. Work is established as important, but it should not impede the rhythms of family life. Jim looks at his watch. Unrushed, he turns to embrace Margaret before the camera pans to their three children giggling on the stairs. Unabashed, they kiss. The affective mood of the house is established: domestic warmth over conjugal sexuality. In later seasons, the credits showed Jim returning from work. Margaret, preparing the evening meal, pauses to welcome him home. Parents and children congregate in the living room and share the events of their day.

The realistic mise en scène of the house further naturalises the middle-class interior. Shot in deep focus, the eye is drawn to the solid furnishings and keepsakes. The latest domestic appliances are also displayed, but they are integrated in a way that seeks to emphasise continuity with tradition as well as celebrate contemporary convenience. As a result, the

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16 The Puritanical tone is continued throughout the house. Following the Code of Television Standards established by the National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters, Margaret and Jim’s bedroom contains two single beds.
Andersons home is a symbolically charged domestic space designed to resonate with the new suburbanites, but also to borrow legitimacy from the classically American. The overarching effect is one of modesty, comfort and stability. In contrast to the tendency towards conspicuous consumption that typifies the upper middle-class abode, these homes struggle to accommodate more than a close circle of friends. Their crowded furnishings and homely decor are inwardly directed, more a product of intimate values projected onto domestic space than any desire towards public performance. A more sociable ‘house’ would unsettle the privacy, comfort and warmth that brought this ‘home’ into being. Behind the hackneyed television entrance ‘Honey I’m Home’, lies domestic comedy’s sense of the word. Home is an emotional state as much as a physical designation: it is a sense of rootedness, security and intimacy. For the family, as President Hoover had earlier suggested, ‘It is the very seat of its being’ (as cited in Stroik, 1968: 43).

The credit sequence and detailed *mise en scène* establish the importance of domesticity and the ideal of togetherness in this world. Work, school and social activities provide plots for the show, but its moral and sentimental focus is typically centred on the moments when against the centrifugal forces of modern life, individuals gather together in the simple pleasure of being a family. Coined by McCall’s magazine in 1954, the 1950s catchword togetherness captured the home and family-centred values of the post-war generation (Jezer, 1982: 223). Togetherness meant greater participation by the father in the domestic sphere coupled with the celebration of the female homemaker. Strong families were seen to be built on the mutual support that each member was willing to offer and receive. An emphasis was placed on shared experience with ultimate meaning and value seen to reside in the family. In essence, togetherness, while emphasising more co-operative gender roles, was a rearticulation of the republican familial ideal: strong families produced good citizens leading to civic virtue. Following from this, the nuclear family was extolled as the fundamental building block of society. The widespread prevalence of this ideal and its conservative implications were encapsulated in a 1958 issue of the widely read *Woman’s Guide for Better Living*: ‘Whether you are a man or a woman’ it advised ‘the family is the unit to which you most genuinely belong ... family is the centre of your living. If it isn’t you've gone astray’ (Miller & Nowak, 1975: 147).
Figure 1: Norman Rockwell’s *Freedom From Want* (1943).

Figure 2: Father Knows Best *Thanksgiving Day* (1954).
In *Father Knows Best*, the ideal of togetherness is captured in a sentimentalised portrait of ‘Thanksgiving Day’. It is a reworking of the values celebrated in Norman Rockwell’s 1943 cover for *The Saturday Evening Post*, ‘Freedom From Want’. From the bottom left-hand corner, Rockwell’s self-portrait is turned knowingly towards the audience, inviting the viewer into this intimate scene. A grandmother, her face etched with care, places an enormous Turkey before her extended family. Femininity rules the domestic space and is identified with sustenance and nurture. Despite the size of the turkey, the white table settings and glasses of water suggest an enduring puritanical tone: the meal is a just reward rather than extravagance. At the head of the table, the grandfather embodies enduring patriarchy. He will carve the turkey distributing the fruits of his labour. Work finds its ultimate purpose in the support of family. Both grandparents reverently preside over the scene while the joy on the granddaughter’s face ensures this day will not be forgotten. A natural order is articulated. In time she will start her own family and prepare the meal for the generations to come. Other members of the family warmly converse while a couple on the left-hand side clasp their hands in prayer. Emotions are magnified and prologued in the anticipation and release of the ritual. Characteristically, Rockwell directs our attention to the moments of grace that puncture the rhythms of ordinary life. Family togetherness is shown to lie at the heart of what Robert Bellah (1967) would call the civil religion of America.

In *Father Knows Best*, the scene is stripped back further to its ultimate essence. Earlier in the episode the family go their separate ways, but return home when they realise Thanksgiving is only meaningful when celebrated together. Excuses are made for their return; a cancelled dinner arrangement, a headache. Emotions build while a strings arrangement swells in the background. Unprepared for a family meal, Margaret searches the freezer and finds some leftover hamburgers. The simplicity of the food distances the occasion from contemporary trappings and points towards older enduring values. The family join hands in a hallowed circle before Jim leads them in prayer:

> Oh Lord, we give thee thanks from the depth of our humble hearts for all the blessings thou have seen fit to bestow upon us. We thank thee for the food which graces our table and the roof which covers our head. We thank thee for the privilege of living as free men in a country which respects our freedom and our personal rights to worship and think and speak as we choose. We thank thee for making us a family, for giving us sincerity and understanding. But most of all dear Lord, we thank you for giving us the greatest gift a family may know, the gift of love for one another. Amen.
Earlier, as tears began to roll, Jim had announced: ‘Good grief, we all sound like the third act of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In the sentimental vein, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel juxtaposed the Christian virtues of the American home with the public institution of slavery. In ‘Thanksgiving Day’, sentimentality functions not as political protest but seemingly as a response to rapid social change. As a result, it is closer to the Victorian sentimentalism that emerged as a reaction to the industrial revolution. In the nineteenth century, the growing divide between the public and private sphere and between production and consumption had started a trend towards the social and emotional isolation of the nuclear family. Confronted by an increasingly rationalised, cold and competitive public sphere, the home became a ‘haven in a heartless world’ (Lasch, 1977). The transitions of the 1950s had furthered this sense of isolation. As Riesman and Whyte noted, suburbia provided only the shallowest of roots. Despite a profusion of social activities, its residents were transients. The suburban home was typically a way-station on the road to a more affluent suburb or a job promotion in another city (Whyte, 1956: 246-258; Riesman, 1965: 68-70). In the 1950s, Americans were more economically and geographically mobile than ever before, but as a consequence, they were less socially embedded and emotionally secure.

In establishing familial roles, it is the role of the father that is most emphatically insisted upon. An ideal suburban father, Jim Anderson is a branch manager of The General Insurance Company. His job is typical of the white-collar employment of the post-industrial service economy. Despite the abstract nature of his work, Jim is a vital member of a business community that is depicted in functionalist terms. From Captains of Industry to janitors, each member of the community is shown to play an integral role in the wider social order. Functionally, insurance further suggests market mechanisms are in place which makes this world safe and dependable. As an orientation to the world, insurance encapsulates the cautious middle-class ethos that runs through the show. In business, the primary motive is caution and security. The show repeatedly emphasises the virtues of hard work and solid returns over abstract and speculative investments. The idea of an insurance broker as hero is

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17 Examples abound in the works of Charles Dickens. See, for example, the familial warmth in *Oliver Twist* (1837-39) or *Great Expectations* (1860-1861). The anxiety contained within these portraits is made more explicit in Dicken’s criticism of the Benthamite logic that pervades the domestic sphere in *Hard Times* (1854). This Dickensian sentimentality is evident in the films of Frank Capra whose moral world seems to have formed something of a template for the creators of *Father Knows Best*. For an extended study of Victorian sentimentality see Elizabeth Nelson’s *Market Sentiments: Middle-Class Market Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (2004).

18 See, for example, the *Father Knows Best* episode ‘Budd the Speculator’.
itself a middle-class romanticism, suggestive of unremitting faith in the institutional framework of capitalism. It is a vision similar to Capra’s virtuous Savings and Loan bankers in Bedford Falls. In both cases, the insurance broker and banker as hero are products of the optimistic and consensual middle-class worldview that existed before the rising cynicism of the new left in the 1960s.

Through its depiction of the economy, *Father Knows Best* naturalises the lifestyle and moral and aesthetic standards of the middle class. The families in domestic comedy are typically neither wealthy enough to avoid work, nor overly burdened by financial responsibilities. Instead, through narrative elision and focus on the family home, their world appears stable and normative. The audience is never told the backstory of the suburban dream, they see nothing of the mortgage payments and career demands required to bring this world into being. While there are allusions to harder times, the Andersons for all intents and purposes are middle-class in perpetuum. Economic realities, when they do intrude, typically appear as opportunities for moral lessons. The desire for material goods and their attendant costs and responsibilities are used to affirm the classic bourgeois virtues of hard work, personal integrity, thrift and deferred gratification that the middle class prides itself on embodying in its financial transactions. In episodes like ‘Bud, the Millionaire’ and ‘Kathy, Girl Executive’, the children are subject to lures of sudden wealth and power. Money functions as a moral test through which they learn lessons of honesty and humility and eventually come to appreciate the higher values and sentiments that lie behind the middle-class economy. Ultimately, they learn the character-building reality of work and that the things you work for bring the most satisfaction. Maturation to an appreciation of the economic base of the world is seen as integral in the development towards adulthood. In the process, the middle-class way of life is shown to be the most morally respectable and naturally attuned to the realities of the world.

Following on from this association of money with higher values, the rest of society is judged through its relationship to the economy. When the working class are portrayed, they are either upwardly mobile, emulating the solid economic practices of the established middle class, or hopelessly incapable of governing their own lives. Those who fail to act responsibly are infantilised and are shown to require the patient guidance of their middle-class benefactors. Younger and less established men are often depicted working late into the night, their financial responsibilities precluding full-scale enjoyment of the domestic ideal. Episodes that deal with these emerging members of the middle class, inevitably preach the relationship
between hard work and success. In ‘Family Dines Out’, Jim initiates his children into the underlying reality of the American system:

There are a great many fields open today if you are willing to start at the bottom and work up. Hard work, perseverance, and determination. That’s the wonderful thing about living in America. Anyone who’s not afraid of hard work has a chance to be a success.

Despite variations in wealth, the show effectively speaks to a universal American culture. Differences of interest and taste, typical of the more subtle theories of class, are played down. While the lower-middle class are less educated and refined and the upper-middle class more luxurious in their tastes, Father Knows Best insists there is widespread moral and aesthetic consensus. Greater differences would suggest the possibility of rancour that would undermine the harmonious society on display. The episodes that deal with the upper-middle class typically espouse a reorientation of the classic bourgeois notion of success. In the process, while the Horatio Alger myth of humble origins remains vital, it is augmented by the celebration of the new suburban man.

The business elite are depicted as slaves to responsibility. They are driven by a relentless work ethic and have endless demands placed on their time. In ‘The Grass is Greener’, Jim is visited by Charles Bradley, an old college friend. The episode opens with the family gathering to watch Charles interviewed on television. He is lauded as a ‘self-made man’ for whom ‘work is the prime motive of his life’. Reminiscing on their college days, Margaret thinks Charles looks strange without his racoon coat. Amused, the children form an association with Davey Crockett suggesting that the Horatio Alger myth, despite its ideological persistence, is a cultural anachronism that belongs with the heroes of the frontier. Throughout the episode, competing ideas of success, the good life and what constitutes the American Dream are played out between the Captain of Industry and the earnest suburban father. Charles’ success leads Jim to reflect upon his own more modest accomplishments. An elderly business associate scolds him for his family-orientated nine-to-five lifestyle, warning that:

This is an age of competition, a man who wants to get ahead has to get up early in the morning; he has to beat the other fella, and has to be fit. Physical fitness leads to mental alertness and mental alertness leads to success.
Inspired, Jim embarks on a self-improvement regime. He comically fails to make any significant changes to his life however and must come to learn the central lesson of the show, a more functionalist than Protestant understanding of character. Each person is born to play a specific role in life and happiness is achieved through knowing yourself and being content with your station. In contrast, Charles embodies traditional Protestant masculinity; he is individualistic, competitive and committed to a personalised vision of self-fulfilment. While affable, Charles is restless and emotionally detached, moving through an endless procession of business meetings. In awe of his friend, Jim beseeches him to take up a civic position he had previously coveted. He has begun to acknowledge that ‘if you want something done go to the busy man. He’s the one who will always find time to do it’. At his nadir, Jim laments over the unrealised dreams of his youth: ‘I was the eager beaver who was going to go places, set the world on fire. Well I came close, I sell insurance to those that do’. Behind his despair lies an enduring association of masculine identity with self-determination, vocation and public success. Margaret, as is typical in these cases, intuits a deeper sense of meaning in family life:

You’re trying to measure success in terms of money dear. That’s not always the yardstick. You’re a success as a man, as a husband and a father. You’re a credit to your community and to your family.
What more could you possibly want?

Realising that the classic notion of success is incompatible with success in the home, Jim is reconciled with his place in life. The resolution of the episode sees Charles visit the Anderson’s home unannounced. He finds Jim enjoying quality time with his family. Charles regrets that his success has come at the cost of family. He admires how relaxed and satisfied Jim seems. Like Charles, the audience is left to admire the perfect balance in Jim’s life. Modern American masculinity is depicted as a trade-off. The thrill of competition in the marketplace has been surrendered for the quieter, but in many ways more rewarding intimacy of the domestic hearth. The moral is that America still needs a few men like Charles—the solitary Captains of Industry, driven by inner necessity—but it needs many more Jim Andersons, white-collar workers committed to their families. The episode is typical of the shift in values in all of the 1950s domestic comedies. While traditional images of success are still celebrated, wider standards have been softened to accord with post-industrial suburban
realities. For these new men, vocation remains a principal site of character formation and self-respect but the higher locus of meaning has shifted to the family.¹⁹

Pivotal to this new ideal is the presence of the father in the home. In all of the 1950s domestic comedies, the father has a professional position that allows him the flexibility to engage in family life.²⁰ These shows discreetly gloss over the long commute home from the city that was the reality for most suburban men. Instead, each day Jim leaves for work around 8:30 a.m. and returns home just after 4:30 p.m. to take up a position in the lounge room from where he adjudicates over the problems of the day. There is an anxiety at play here over the relocation of the male in the traditionally feminine domain of the home. Ideal masculinity is depicted in transition from the stern and autonomous Protestant type to one in which the traditionally feminine virtues of flexibility, emotional sensitivity and understanding play a greater role.

The anxiety that accompanied this recalibration of masculinity is evident in the show’s repeated overstatement of its merits. Storylines regularly had Jim in line for awards from local community groups and the Chamber of Commerce. Episode titles were even more explicit, with titles including: ‘Father of the Year’, ‘Hero Father’, ‘The Ideal Father’ and ‘A Man of Merit’. In one episode, Jim is again worried about whether or not he has been a success in life. Having chosen family life over career development, he wistfully reflects on what could have been. In a dream sequence, lacking any sense of irony, he meets a waspish St. Peter at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter assures him that he is an upstanding businessman, a great father and just the type of man wanted in heaven. In Springfield, even the once implacable Protestant God now has employees giving pep talks. At this point, vehement praise has become classic overcompensation. Behind the insistence that ‘father knows best’ lies an anxiety over declining authority and waning masculinity.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Jim on work: ‘That won’t go away. It will still be here waiting for me on Monday. But why do I do this work, so we can live and enjoy life a little. If we didn’t take the time to enjoy it then what would be the use of the work’. And, ‘Its amazing how your troubles sort of melt away as soon as you drive in that driveway and those kids swarm all over you. What a tonic, what a tonic for an old beat up businessman. Here I am just a doormat for everyone else’s troubles but at home there is a doormat just for me and it says welcome’.

²⁰ In The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet there is no attempt at domestic realism. Ozzie is simply at home on an endless weekend. In The Donna Reed Show, Alex is a paediatrician with a home practice, Ward Cleaver in Leave it to Beaver has an unstated professional job that allows him to manage his own time. In all of these shows, when the moral of the episode is not directly related to the virtues of work, work only intrudes into private life through the occasional Saturday morning at the office or as an establishing scene for the plot.
The movement away from the classic masculine ideal was a central theme of 1950s social criticism. In tracing the decline of the Protestant Ethic, Riesman and Whyte had charted the waning of American individualism. The sense of emasculation that was implicit in their work was made explicit by later critics. The contours of contemporary American life—the bureaucratic corporation, mass culture, the suburbs and the home—were all seen to have a feminising effect on the American male. At the heart of these concerns lay an enduring identification with bourgeois gender roles. Masculine traits such as competition, self-reliance and production were believed to be associated with the public sphere; whereas femininity, characterised in terms of passivity, dependence and consumption, was identified with the private sphere. Critics maintained that white-collar suburban America had disrupted these functional balances. The 1950s male was increasingly defined by acquiescence. He was subject to the ordinances of impersonal bureaucracy at work and the authority of his wife in the home. Writing in 1958, the American historian Arthur Schlesinger bemoaned the fact that American masculinity had ‘lost its rugged clarity of outline’ (2008: 292). The masculine ideals of the frontier pioneer and the Captain of Industry had been shaped by competition, first with nature and then in the market. In the 1950s, reassured by the Social Ethic, the middle-class male had come home to stay. In the process, gender roles were seen to be converging. For men, work and family life now required a heightened attention to interpersonal relationships, emotional sensitivity and adaptability. These were traits, these critics argued, that were traditionally associated with the feminine sphere.

Popular culture throughout the 1950s provided iconic reinforcement of these fears. In Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesmen* (1949), Willy Loman—the everyman laid low—wrestles with the mediocrity of his life. He is haunted by the ghost of his successful brother, a guilt-ridden projection of his own failure to grasp the American Dream. Willy is a modern white-collar worker. While financially secure, he is dependent upon a business world he has no control over. He dimly senses the meaninglessness of his work and has only redemptive illusions to sustain him. In Nicholas Ray’s *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), the father embodies the emasculated suburban male. Without a meaningful sense of identity outside the home, he is henpecked by his wife and is weak and indecisive. Three times in the movie, his delinquent

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21 The most sophisticated and influential images of the domineering American mother were provided by Geoffrey Gorer’s *The Americans* (1948) and Eric Erikson’s *Childhood and Society* (1950).
son, in desperate need of a role model, asks him what it takes to be a man. He is unable to answer.

Part of the problem was that the white-collar world suffered from a dearth of positive role models. The frontier had furnished America with icons of rugged individualism. Similarly, the nineteenth century had provided the ideal of the Captain of Industry. In contrast, the 1950s contributed little more than a picture of secure work and well-to-do suburban contentment. Responding to this paucity of image, 1950s critics wrote in the shadow of Nietzsche and Weber. Nietzsche had emphasised the essential relationship between struggle, worth and attainment. It was a Protestant sensibility that guarded against the collapse into enervated consumerism. Following on from this, 1950s critics argued that mass society, mass culture and mass consumption were typified by passivity, conformity and the sluggish temper of Nietzsche’s last man. At the heart of their critique was an anxiety over the consequences of affluence. Waning masculinity then, was seen to be a symptom of a wider cultural malaise: the collective retreat into a flabby and devitalised consumerism. *Father Knows Best* participates in these concerns through its depiction of the evolution of the suburban male. Jim Anderson espouses traditional masculine notions of hard work and success and supports a classic vision of the American Dream. At the same time, he is illustrative of a turn towards consumption, leisure and the family. At its heart, *Father Knows Best* attempted to carve a niche between the heroes of the past and the comfort and conformity of the present.

The portrayal of women in the show is similarly multifaceted. In feminist criticism, the 1950s housewife has become something of a straw-man, a ground zero for attacks upon traditional gender roles. While overstated, this critique is not without merit. June Cleaver, the mother in *Leave it To Beaver*, embodies the narrow contours of ‘the feminine mystique’; she is attractive, immaculately attired, congenial, gormless and hopelessly overwhelmed by anything beyond the domestic sphere (Friedan, 1962). Yet feminist critiques typically fail to appreciate the subtlety of better-scripted programs of the period, like *Father Knows Best* and *The Donna Reed Show*. In *Father Knows Best*, Margaret is a college-educated woman who has chosen to become a homemaker. Episodes repeatedly emphasised her intelligence,

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22 The following ideal type is indebted to portraits of the lower-middle class in Georg Lukács Soul and Form (1911); Christopher Lasch’s The True and Only Heaven (1991); and John Carroll’s Ego and Soul: The Modern West in Search of Meaning (1998).

23 The values displayed here embody what Christopher Lasch has identified as the lower-middle-class response to liberal-feminist critiques of housework and motherhood. See, for example, his discussion of the opposing
practicality and aesthetic sense. A cynical reading would see these attributes as devious legitimations for traditional gender roles. If the gifted are content with being housewives, then the average women should be as well. However, this reading overlooks the enormous power and influence ascribed to the homemaker in this culture.

In *Father Knows Best* the home is the highest good. Husbands work through the day anticipating the return to the domestic hearth. For women, the monotony of housework is offset by what it represents. Despite masculine encroachment, the home remains a feminine domain: its mood and ethos an extension of the mother-child relationship. Through childbirth and nurturing, women are shown to be naturally less egoistic than men and more inclined to identify with the needs of the wider family. Maternity brings acceptance of the stages of life and with it a sense of modesty and finitude. For men, limitations are less naturally accepted. Masculine identity remains in large part publicly constructed, tied to the idea of workplace success and its attendant anxieties over redundancy. Jim, at times, is beset by fears of aging, waning physical prowess, and being out of step with the times. His strategies for mitigating these anxieties are often comically immature; desperate attempts to recapture his youth or a premature surrender to dotage. Margaret, in contrast, is little fazed by the passage of time. In these moments of crisis, her wisdom and self-assurance deflate the notion that father knows best. This essential role of women in the family is supported by Emile Durkheim’s *Suicide* (1901). Following divorce or the death of a spouse, men are much more likely to kill themselves than women. Similarly, single men are twice as likely to commit suicide as their married counterparts. Without the structure and order of the family home, they can find no restraining principle within themselves that can stem the tide of anomie.

Ostensibly, the woman’s role in this world is secondary. The father is repeatedly shown to solve the problems of the day through his personal intervention and sagacious advice. Throughout, his wife remains a supportive presence at his side. At times she has a conciliatory function, checking his ego when domestic power threatens to go to his head. True to the traditional feminine ideal, she is adept at understanding social nuance, often perspective in the debate over abortion: ‘They agreed that women ought to get equal pay for equal work in the marketplace, but they did not agree that unpaid work in the home was degrading and oppressive. What they found “disturbing [in] the whole abortion mentality,” as one of them put it, “is the idea that family duties—rearing children, managing a home, loving and caring for a husband—are somehow degrading to women”’ (Lasch, 1991: 489).

24 See, for example, ‘The Spirit of Youth’ and ‘Grandpa Jim’.
finding a middle road between the dogmatic moral assertions of her husband and the demands of the situation. Her wider authority is hinted at in several episodes. There is a suggestion that women ultimately pull the strings, that part of their deeper wisdom and security is an understanding and acceptance of their husbands’ need for authority. Jim in his own masculine way acknowledges that:

You’re the hub around which we all revolve, the centre, the axle, the beacon light in the lighthouse, guiding us all safely home.

As a result, episodes tend not to focus directly on Margaret. The episodes that deal with her usually revolve around temporary feelings of inadequacy over her domestic role. The resolutions are usually neat. Typically, Margaret is confronted by an independent female counter-type. These women inevitably come to express a deep seated respect for the sanctity of her role. As a result, she is reaffirmed in her position by the knowledge that through familial love and the duties it entails, she is operating on a higher and more rewarding level than self-interest.25

An exemplar is the episode ‘Women in The House’. Virg Carlson, an old friend of Jim’s, and his new, much younger, wife Jill have just moved to Springfield. ‘You know, I think Virg has a daughter complex’ Jill laughs, ‘that’s how he treats me most of the time, as if I were his daughter.’ Freudian motifs recur throughout the episode, their seamless interpolation into the dialogue suggesting an audience possessing at least a populist familiarity with psychoanalysis. As in age, the couple are culturally worlds apart. Virg is a flannel-suited organisation man while Jill is a scruffy Beatnik. She is young, eccentric and lacking in social grace. Visiting the Andersons, she discovers a Victorian novel on the coffee table:

Jill: [Disgustedly.] Silas Mariner?

Margaret: Well, I think that one of the children is reading that for school. It’s, uh, well, it’s required reading.

Jill: No wonder they don’t learn anything. Oh, say, have you read Kafka?

25 See Margaret in defence of her vocation: ‘I know of nothing more worthwhile than a family… the demanding, difficult, but the most fulfilling and wonderful job in the world, motherhood’.
Margaret: No, I don’t even know who wrote it.

Jill [Laughing wildly.] You’re priceless. Franz Kafka, he's one of my pets; writes beautifully. You must read The Trial, you absolutely must! I think it compares with Jean-Paul Sartre’s Nausea.

Jim: That’s a book?

Jill: That’s a book. His first novel, and better than Baudelaire, I think. Of course you’ve read Baudelaire.

Margaret: No, I haven’t.

From literature, the conversation shifts back to ordinary life. Jill satirises the conventional moorings of Middle America: its pragmatism, love of order and joy in simple pleasures. Throughout the episode, Kafka’s The Trial serves as a loose allegory for Jill’s and Margaret’s journey towards self-realisation in feminine truths. When Kathy arrives home, the first cracks emerge in Jill’s brash exterior. She introduces herself as ‘your spooky aunty Jill’ before a terrified Kathy runs away. Momentarily taken aback, Jill admits, ‘I have the same effect on dogs’ before returning to literary pretension, ‘it reminds me of what somebody said of W. C. Fields once. “Any man who hates dogs and children can’t be all bad”’. The adults laugh uncomfortably. Jill satirically presses on but the effects of Kathy’s rejection remain. As the episode unfolds, Jill’s bookishness is exposed as compensation for an isolated life. But initially, Margaret sees only the personal affront. She complains to Jim, ‘I felt like a fool... How would you feel if someone were making fun of you ... My home cooking, my home sewing, my home stupidity — a sweet, prim, dumb, little provincial wife.’

Tensions escalate when Virg is called away on business, leaving Jill to stay with the Andersons. She makes camp in the living room with a seemingly endless supply of cigarettes and books. Confronted by Jill’s attacks on her way of life, Margaret responds with stoic fortitude. She rises above her frustrations and continues on as a paragon of domesticity. Betty shares her mother’s values but is less circumspect. Behind closed doors she bickers about Jill: she is lazy, inconsiderate, and most damningly, unfeminine. As the days pass, the strain on Margaret begins to show. Jill’s continued repudiation of domesticity magnifies her own anxieties over the importance of her role. Finally, Betty declares, ‘Mother I’m not going to stand by and watch you become a repressed neurotic… In my psychology book it says that
when two persons with conflicting personalities are thrown together for prolonged periods…”

She is cut off by Jim, who makes light of psychological readings. As an explanatory device, Freudian conflict models are too far removed from the vision of harmony that underlies the show. Conflict is shown to be a product of misunderstanding and misalignment, ultimately resolvable through self-awareness, communication and mutual respect.

The turning point is a second scene between Jill and Kathy. Caked in mud from playing outside, Kathy calls for her ‘mommy’. When Margaret doesn’t answer, Jill responds to the call, her growing maternal instincts are portrayed as a catalyst for her acceptance of universal feminine truths. Whilst washing Kathy’s hair she is bombarded by questions about her own family. Jill admits she has no mother, children or friends except for her husband. She is lonely and unfulfilled. Kathy says she will be her friend at which point Jill breaks down and rushes from the room. After asking Kathy what is wrong, Margaret finally realises the deeper truth behind Jill’s disaffection with family life. Jill’s intellectualism and cynicism are fronts for a lonely woman who hasn’t found her proper place in life. Jill, it appears, has been a kind of inverse Madame Bovary, staring longingly through the window at cosy domesticity from her meaningless Beatnik world.

In the concluding scene, the Kafkaesque has become Capraesque. With a new-found appreciation of family life, Jill throws herself into household tasks. While washing the dishes, she bonds with Betty over how she met Virg. Again Freudian readings have proven to be misleading. Their relationship is not based on a daughter-complex; it is an expression of genuine love. The camera pans to Margaret lounging on the sofa reading Kafka’s The Trial. The absurdity of the concluding image suggests several messages. The value of high culture, embodied in Kafka, is deflated; it is something to be enjoyed after the serious business of the day. However, for Middle America, its mood and language remain largely foreign. Ironically, existentialism is exposed as a doctrine for those who have an inauthentic relationship to real life. The existentialist critique of bad faith and sense of abandonment in modern life are swept under the carpet through a functionalist understanding of existence. Intellectually, the integrity of the housewife is restored. Her failure to read Kafka is not a sign of lack of culture but of a commitment to the more important elements of life. Finally, the show is insistent that women are happiest as homemakers. Throughout the series, middle-class gender roles are shown to have developed naturally from complementary and intractable biological functions.
The central message that emerges from the portrait of family life is that domestic bliss requires a strict but natural and complementary delineation of male and female roles. For men this means a softening of the Protestant Ethic into the suburban father, for women it is a return to the ideal of the Victorian Angel. In the appropriately entitled ‘An Extraordinary Woman’, another college friend of Jim and Margaret’s visits Springfield. Dr. Mary Louise Brown is a famous physician. For years she has worked for humanitarian missions in Africa. She has just published her first book, the widely praised *African Darkness*. When Jim raves about the book, Margaret is taken aback. Her life compares poorly to her celebrity friend’s. In college, Mary Lou was better than Margaret at everything. Margaret always ‘trailed behind second best’. Mary Lou’s return awakens old anxieties. The resolution provides the clearest articulation of the show’s idea of happiness and success. When Margaret declares admiration for her friend, Mary Lou responds:

> All through school you were more or less my idea of what I’d like to be… You always seemed to know the true value of everything. You were so confident. I had to keep winning tournaments and elections to prove myself… When you lost at tennis you didn’t seem to really mind. You enjoyed the game for the game itself. You were like that about everything… I can’t stand losing.

In a ridiculous plot twist, Mary Lou confesses that in college she was secretly in love with Jim. Her outstanding success is reduced to a kind of mournful sublimation of her real dreams. Despite her accomplishments, she is left to wonder what could have been. Margaret has been the ultimate victor. Mary Lou continues:

> [Jim] said you were the most extraordinary woman he’d ever known…. He said that the one thing he always admired in anyone is their ability to do a job well regardless of what it is. He said the way you go about being a wife and mother makes it an enviable art. ... You know, Margaret, you have the world at your feet, you have everything any woman could possibly want.

The conversation is interrupted by the entrance of Margaret’s children. They surround her, sharing an unassuming but meaningful moment. Margaret thanks Mary Lou for reminding her of how lucky she is. The scene cuts to Mary Lou alone on a plane. She is now high above Springfield, staring out the window pensively. Like Charley Bradley, she has found total commitment to vocation a lonely and intractable task. However, for women, the pursuit of a career outside the home requires a greater sacrifice. Men who are excessively devoted to work still have families, however distant. For women, family life must be renounced. Mary
Lou’s *African Darkness* symbolises the distance travelled from feminine norms by the women of vocation. There is an enduring tension in the show between its veneration of these heroic types and honest suburbanites. The heroic are esteemed for their selfless devotion to humanity. They are the builders and defenders of civilisation. Yet, their heroism is always juxtaposed with its personal costs. While continuing to celebrate the high flyers, television has shifted its gaze to the multitude of quiet achievers that lie beneath them: the unheroic types, whose life at times seems plain but, when looked at correctly, is deeply rewarding.

The Anderson children are fledgling versions of their parents. Betty is obsessed with fashion and boys, prone to bouts of hysteria over a ruined dress or a broken date. At heart, she is a good person who is finding her way from teenage self-preoccupation to the deeper satisfaction that comes with her mother’s role. Bud is the all-American boy, obsessed with cars and sports. A typical adolescent male, he struggles to reconcile desires for individuality and adventure with the example of his idolised father. Kathy, in the early seasons, is androgynous, oscillating between wanting to be a varsity quarterback and a homecoming queen. In childhood, this inconstancy is endearing. But as she ages, her friends find it strange. In the final season, with the aid of her mother and sister, she is initiated into the joys of being a young American woman. The harmonious growth towards adulthood throughout the series suggests an absence of any real problems. Life is depicted as a natural progression through the stages of maturation, each with its own joys and rewards.

This overarching view of life is encapsulated in the episode ‘Betty’s Graduation’. Anxious about finishing high school, Betty believes she will be saying goodbye to everything she holds dear. Unable to bear the loss, she returns to her favourite childhood haunt: ‘I would stop all the clocks, I’d padlock time’ she cries. Jim finds her distraught on the bank of a stream. In a moment of extraordinary profundity for a domestic comedy, the big questions of life and death are broached. The conversation encapsulates the cosmology of the series and is worth quoting in full:

*Jim:* Didn’t it ever occur to you that’s exactly what life is — change? If something stopped changing, it wouldn’t be living anymore. It’s the changing that makes it stimulating, and exciting, challenging. This is nothing to be sad about, this is good.

*Betty:* Is it?
Jim: Sure. It’s, uh — well, it’s like this stream. Look at it. Watch it. See how it flows free and fast? Like it’s laughing, dancing on the rocks. There’s excitement there. Here the water’s fresh and clear, and alive, beautiful. But look down there at it where that old log has fallen into the water, dammed it up, slowed it down, shackled it. And what happens to the water? Is it fresh and clear? No it is muddy and murky. There’s no laughter. It has lost the excitement of discovering what’s around the next bend, and the next one after that. Stop the water completely, and it becomes stagnant. You don’t want to do that to your life, do you?

Betty: Let’s take your pretty little stream. What happens to it when it goes where it eventually goes, into the ocean? What happens then? It gets all swallowed up, mixed up with billions of other drops of water, drops in the ocean, lost forever. Isn’t that right?

Jim: Look, let’s face it — I’m no poet, no philosopher. I’m just a guy who sells insurance. But I know you’re mixed up on one point. You think graduation is the end of the line, the point where the stream empties into the ocean. But it’s not. Graduation is back there, one of the first bends. The best part is still ahead.

At the heart of this vision is the acceptance of the world as given. In the face of nature, the only appropriate response is modesty and humility. There is a sense that there is nothing new in what we do. Each of us is following a course laid out through the ages. There is comfort in this order. Middle-class pragmatism rarely rises to the level of poetry or philosophy. Life is to be lived, not dissected in words or books. A more romantic sensibility would be frustrated by the limitations of everyday life and yearn for definitive answers. The middle-class life-mood is its opposite: reverent, at times pensive, yet optimistic and on the side of life. The acceptance of finitude brings a capacity to find pleasure in the simple things in life; a shared meal, an evening spent with friends or weekends reading by the fire; all suffused with a sentimental reverence for family and the home. It is a religious worldview in the widest possible sense. The world is held to be ordered and complete and there is trust in the course of life.

**Father Knows Best and the Middle-Class Ideal.**

Behind its idyllic portrait of middle-class life, the narrative format of *Father Knows Best* suggests the rear-guard nature of its worldview. Classic bourgeois narratives were typically *Bildungsroman*: stories of moral and material development. As such, they had a linear, forward looking structure. In contrast, the narratives of domestic comedy are circular. Each
episode starts with the status quo before a problem is introduced that affects an individual, the family or the wider community. The resolution sees a solution to the problem and a return to the status quo. As a result, each week the viewer is left reassured that established values hold true and will endure through the vicissitudes of modern life. In this way, each episode functions as a modern morality play. Everyday events take on a universal significance, either galvanising the fundamental beliefs of the community or raising the spectre of decay. The resolution of conflict and the inevitable happy ending ensures the message is unwaveringly conservative. Behind the insistence that ‘father knows best’, the real hero that emerges is the universally applicable value of the middle class.

This is achieved in several ways. In line with Whyte’s depiction of the Social Ethic as a lack of tension between individual and group aspirations, domestic comedies depoliticise their locales. When political issues are presented, they are selected from the widest area of consensus; they focus on issues like capitalism versus communism or bromides on the relationship between civic participation and good government. These communities have no conflicting interests or enduring social problems. Instead, interpretively, problems remain at the level of individual morality. In the world of domestic comedy there are no bad institutions or antiquated mores and rarely bad people, only breakdowns in communication and temporary lapses in proper behaviour. When dissonance appears, it is in controlled discursive environments. Countervailing ideas are introduced, interpreted and dismissed. We are told that excessive individual ambition leads to loneliness, people read Kafka because they have not found their proper place in life, and psychoanalysis or any conflict theory, is the stuff of armchair philosophers who haven’t experienced real family and community life.

The surface realism of the show suggests it is open to the liberal discussion of ideas. In effect, this realism is an artifice against dissent. At times plotlines spill over their carefully delineated boundaries. When episodes broach questions of gender roles, the meaning behind consumer behaviour or even the realities of modernisation, they are locked down through plot contrivance or narrative ellipsis. Where there is potential ambiguity in interpretation, the audience is often guided to the correct response by the laughter track. Consensus is achieved through a shared anxiety over not fitting in and appearing ridiculous. These moments of anxiety are typical of Riesman’s other-directed type. At other times, sentimentality is employed so that the heart can help the head across the line. When questions of ultimate meaning emerge they are folded into faith in community and a wider deistic order. The
overarching message is to know your place in the order of things and that happiness is found by balancing individual desires with service to the group.

Didactically, *Father Knows Best* insists on the value of the non-heroic life. As Jim comes to realise, television’s suburbanites ‘are not going to set the world on fire’. They often find classic images of the American Dream inconsonant with the times and are prone to moments of despair. Yet, *Father Knows Best* suggests a quieter and more democratic form of heroism is to be found in the order and regularity that is typified by life in the suburbs. Often, this is explored through the contrast of the fatherly wisdom with the idealism of youth. Mirroring the growth to maturity of the nation, the children ripen to the realisation that ordinary life has its own rewards. There is a humility and acceptance of limits in this position that resists making excessive demands of life. *Father Knows Best* takes seriously the modest hopes and dreams of the everyman. In the process, it endows this life with a sense of significance and respectability. Throughout the series, the past is invoked for a sense of continuity and moral guidance, but the future remains entirely absent. The effect of all of this is to leave the viewer with the sense of an eternal and beneficent present where all real problems have been solved and only minor difficulties arise that are easily dealt with in the naturalised suburban home and nuclear family. The irony behind this is that these images of timeless stability were being presented to an audience living through a period of unprecedented socio-economic change.

On the surface, *Father Knows Best* confirms most of what Riesman and Whyte had to say about the 1950s. However, the subtext suggests conflicting evaluations. Riesman and Whyte tended to be arbitrary in their choice of cultural texts, choosing those that confirmed their arguments for other-directed culture. That, only twenty years later, sociologists like Richard Sennett (1977) and Christopher Lasch (1978) would be writing about the collapse of the public sphere and the culture of narcissism, seems to confirm they were operating in a sociological tradition with a tendency towards the dramatic. Reading *Father Knows Best* alongside these texts provides a fruitful counterbalance to their value-laden diagnosis. The tensions between the city and the small town, the Protestant Ethic and togetherness, work and leisure and gender roles and self-fulfilment that emerge in *Father Knows Best*, suggest a degree of sophistication and cultural nuance that has been overlooked in sociological analysis. Culturally, Riesman and Whyte delivered a mildly-Nietzschean critique of the herd-like conformity and docile consumerism they saw in 1950s America. This critique tends to underplay the notion of the good life that is central to the show. While the vocational aspect
of bourgeois ideology is shown to have lost ground, the domestic or sentimental side remains undiminished. Consequently, *Father Knows Best* rejects the notion of suburbia as overly conformist and materialistic. Episodes repeatedly emphasise that ‘conformity’ is a consensus that emerges not through the failing of individual will, but rather through common-sense agreement with the values on display. Similarly, materialism is the superficial complement of affluence, the outward expression of the comfort and security requisite for the celebration of enduring values.

At its heart, *Father Knows Best* strives to contain America’s paradoxical veneration of individualism and community and modernity and tradition within its suburban ambit. While staking out its Golden Mean, the unfailing optimism of plot, black-and-white morality and all-encompassing sentimentality borrow liberally from the small-town tradition. Consequently, the tone of the show is primarily nostalgic. Springfield is a world where intimacy takes precedence over industry, continuity over change and where traditional beliefs triumph in their weekly skirmishes with modernity. As an expression of the 1950s *Zeitgeist*, the need to create this backwards-looking hermeneutically-sealed world, suggests that in the final analysis that *Father Knows Best* is best read as much as an expression of enduring anxiety as of the ‘innocent optimism’ (Riesman as cited Wrong, 1998: 163) and ‘the American celebration’ for which it is commonly known (Mills, 1956: 25).
5- **Mad Men**: Advertising the American Dream

We’re flawed because we want so much more. We’re ruined because we get these things and wish for what we had.

Don Draper

You’re thinking about this in a very narrow way. The idea is that everyone is going to have a house, a car, a TV, the American Dream.

Pete Campbell

*Mad Men* (2007-2015) is a cable television drama that follows the lives of a group of people working for Sterling Cooper, an advertising agency in 1960s New York. Critically acclaimed, the series won sixteen Emmy Awards—including Outstanding Drama Series for each of its first four seasons—and four Golden Globes. Alongside series like *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *The Wire* (2002-2008), and *Deadwood* (2004-2006), it has been repeatedly cited as an exemplar of the current Golden Age of television.\(^1\) Critics have suggested that the existential musings, complex characters and intricate narrative arcs of these series have lent cable television dramas a cultural authority previously reserved for more traditional artistic forms like the novel.\(^2\) While ranking well in Neilson polls, *Mad Men* has achieved a much wider cultural influence than is suggested by its direct audience. From retro advertising campaigns and parodies on *The Simpsons* and *Saturday Night Live*, to a reinvigoration of interest in

\(^1\) For an extended discussion on the emergence of a Golden Age of television see R. J. Thompson, *Television’s Second Golden Age* (1997). Thompson lists 12 characteristics that define modern ‘quality television’ including the emergence of television auteurs who have brought a filmic sensibility to the medium, narrative complexity, an aspiration to realism and a tendency to deal with controversial subject matter (1997: 13-16).

period fashion, film and literature, it has left an indelible stamp on American culture. As the editor of a recent academic anthology on the series notes, *Mad Men* has become ‘pervasive in the cultural vernacular’ and is often used as a reference point in contemporary debates over race, gender and the merits of consumer capitalism’ (Stoddart, 2011: 10).

Beginning in 1960, *Mad Men* straddles the divide between the suburban ideal of *Father Knows Best* and the emergent counter-cultural revolutions of the 1960s. As Morris Dickstein, in his seminal portrait of the moral, artistic and intellectual climate of the 1960s suggests:

> The late fifties were a fertile period, a seedbed of ideas that would burgeon and live in the more activist, less reflective climate that followed. A comparable breakup and transition could be traced in almost every sphere of American society during the same period: in politics, in education, in advertising, in popular culture, and in each of the creative arts... It was an exciting time to be growing up: less stable than the fifties, less hectic than the sixties, but alive with possibility, rich with eerie dissonances between a still-living past and a dimly apprehended future.  

(Dickstein, 1977: 88)

Echoing these sentiments, many historians have come to refer to the period between the end of World War Two and the early 1960s as ‘the long 1950s’. They point to an enduring acceptance, at least on the surface, of a ‘set of narratives’ that celebrated ‘middle-class values’ (Nadel, 1995: 4). As the 1960s progressed, the civil rights movement, second wave feminism, political assassinations and the televised horrors of the Vietnam War are held to have engendered a decisive breach from the innocent optimism of the previous era. In *Mad Men*, these events are filtered through the self-awareness of its protagonists. The series follows how white middle-class myopia is succeeded by a host of anxieties and doubts. Beginning in self-recrimination, the characters’ disaffection spread outwards to the cultural and institutional realities that previously had unconsciously buttressed their way of life. The result is a nuanced and ambivalent sense of American character and history. In contrast to conservative narratives of cultural decline and liberal celebrations of social reform, *Mad Men* documents how social change can be both liberating and terrifying. At its heart, the show

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3 The exact time when the ‘long 1950s’ are held to end varies in accordance with research focus. Alan Nadel in *Containment Culture* (1995), and M. Keith Booker in *The Post-Utopian Imagination* (2002), for example, point to the highpoint of the Cold War in 1964 as the terminus of the period. Others, like Richard Fried, point towards the assassination of John F. Kennedy in November 1963 (2004: 81-88). For the purpose of this thesis, exact time frames are less important than establishing a sense of cultural continuity between the late 1950s and the early 1960s.
maintains this tension between welcoming the dismantling of repressive social strictures and tolling the existential costs.

Thematically, the series draws upon the dominant literary concerns of the period. Mid-century novelists like Sloan Wilson, Richard Yates and John Cheever fleshed out a portrait of cultural conformity, alienation and suburban misery. Convinced of the dreary intractability of the American way of life, these novelists tended to employ temporally and spatially tight narrative frames to emphasise their sense of stasis. While thematically similar, narratively, Mad Men has a closer affinity to the historically-informed realism of writers like Flaubert, Tolstoy and Mann. Like Buddenbrooks, Mad Men is a genealogical study that examines the past in order to trace the conditions that have led to the present. As Mathew Weiner, the show’s creator and auteur, has repeatedly insisted, the series is not an exercise in nostalgia: ‘You tell me this is a period piece’ he has remarked, ‘the men in the show are asking, “Is this it?” The woman are asking “what’s wrong with me?”’ (Weiner as cited in Armstrong, 2012: 61). Larger than its historical locale, Mad Men is about the enduring problems people face in their daily lives, problems of career, money, marriage and family that ultimately lead into the timeless question of ‘what should I do?’ and ‘how can I make sense of my life?’ This then, is the story of a people losing faith in their governing narratives and struggling to bring a sense of meaning to their lives. It is a thoroughly modern story.

Don Draper: American Irony

As the main protagonist of Mad Men, Don Draper embodies the hopes, fantasies and ultimately nightmares of Middle America. Ostensibly, he is a masculine ideal. Don is classically handsome, intelligent, sophisticated and exudes confidence and charm. A natural leader, he is cool and decisive in moments of crisis, influencing colleagues and clients through his creative brilliance and the intensity of his presence. Outside of the office, women find him similarly irresistible, seduced by his suave persona and movie-star looks. On the surface, Don appears to have it all: the highflying career, adulation, picture-perfect family and idyllic suburban home. As his protégé Peggy Olson surmises, ‘you have so much of

everything’. Yet behind the charisma, Don is inching towards despair. An exemplary self-made man, he finds little satisfaction in the conventional trappings of the American Dream. Throughout the series, he remains restless, haunted and detached, searching for something elusive that he is unable to articulate. His story begins where the Horatio Alger narrative leaves off, at the heights of success. Like Thomas Buddenbrook, Don grapples with a gnawing sense of despair that comes from tasting the best his world has to offer yet finding it is not enough. After making repeated gestures towards career, marriage and family—the normative images of the good life—Don’s story ultimately comes to suggest that a hollow core lies behind the Rockwellian facade of Middle America. In the process, Don asks his own form of the Buddenbrooks’ question ‘what comes next?’

Don’s fate is foreshadowed in Mad Men’s animated title sequence. A silhouette of a man in a white collared shirt and suit enters an office and places his suitcase down. The office furnishings are pallid and insubstantial, seemingly unable to elicit any enduring sense of attachment. As he pauses, the room begins to dissolve before the camera cuts to him tumbling through the Manhattan skyline. He passes skyscrapers covered in advertisements. Slogans like: ‘Enjoy the Best America Has to Offer’ and ‘It’s the Gift that Never Fails’ are accompanied by images of luxury and domestic contentment. They are Madison Avenue’s articulation of the good life in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a period when sex and sophistication were sold alongside station wagons and soap. As a whole, these advertisements promise a workable compact between modern pleasures and middle-class virtue, their disparate threads woven together by the promise of happiness. Despite their allure, these images fail to arrest his fall. The world as advertised seems to have been exposed as a series of brittle illusions that will fall apart upon interrogation. The elegiac instrumental piece that

5 Several commentators have pointed to the obvious association with the footage of the ‘Falling Man’ from the World Trade Centre during the September 11 terrorist attacks (Edgerton, 2009: 12; Hardie, 2012:163; Vlaminck, 2012: 34-34). Mathew Weiner has repeatedly denied the influence of this image and interpretatively it seems to be a dead end. As film critic Philip French helpfully suggests, a more likely inspiration is the films of Alfred Hitchcock, in particularly the title sequence for North By North West where ‘Cary Grant plays a senior New York advertising executive snatched from his comfortable world and hurtled into a maelstrom of incomprehensible events’ (French, 2012).

6 As William Whyte suggested, ‘Few talents are more commercially sought today than the knack of describing departures from the Protestant Ethic as reaffirmations of it’ (1956: 21). For an extended discussion of the tension between the traditional middle-class values of thrift and deferred gratification and the modern luxuries and extravagance portrayed in post-war advertising see Rowan Marchland’s Advertising the America Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940 (1985). Marchland maintains that mid-century advertising simultaneously celebrated the emergent consumer culture whilst attempting to dispel the anxieties engendered by rapid socio-economic change. Consequently, it served the public both as an educational and therapeutic tool (Marchland, 1985: 335-364).
accompanies the sequence sets the tone for this disenchantment of the American Dream. Throughout the fall, the silhouette’s gestures remain laconic, his ‘fall’ apparently not a product of suicidal protest but of weary resignation. As his composure returns, the office rematerializes. Seated on a couch and staring off into the distance, inner anarchy is concealed once more behind an immaculate exterior. The final shot is from behind, avoiding the intimacy of facial gestures and focusing upon the enigma that lies behind the well-tailored suit. The question ‘who is Don Draper?’ will recur throughout the series.

Following on from the title sequence, the pilot episode explores this question through a day in Don’s life. The opening shot tracks through a stylish Manhattan bar thick with smoke, drinking and lively conversation. The camera pushes in on Don sitting alone in a booth, scribbling advertising slogans on a cocktail napkin, his brow creased in concentration. He is introduced through his work; the intensity of his focus coupled with his separation from the crowd reminiscent of the ironic distance of Thomas Mann’s bourgeois artists. Through penetrating insight, Don is detached from the world he observes yet drawn to its warmth and promise of communion. From Manhattan, the scene shifts to a loft in Greenwich Village. Don’s girlfriend Midge is a Beatnik painter, cynically plying her trade for the corporate world: ‘they invented something called grandmothers’ day’ she tells him, ‘it ought to keep me busy drawing puppies for a month’. As an embodiment of counter-cultural tendencies, Midge functions as a counterfoil to the normative order depicted in the show. Through his relationship with Midge, Don is shown to exist somewhere between the irregularity of bohemia and the ordered world of his grey flannel suit. Ignoring Midge’s artist’s contempt, Don obsesses over his own work problems. As the series progresses, work will remain his one enduring passion, a solitary guiding force in an increasingly unravelling life. The creative aspect of this work lends it further gravity. As an advertising executive, Don is directly engaged with the needs and dreams of the public. His work is a vehicle through which he probes the hopes and desires of the contemporary American psyche and perhaps through which he may ultimately come to better understand his own.

At work the following morning, Don prepares for a meeting with executives from Lucky Strike. Through a series of nervous conversations with his colleagues, the audience is made aware that government watchdogs have cracked down on the tobacco companies’ use of medical testimonies. Cigarettes, it is explained, can no longer be advertised as harmless and the public’s growing awareness of their health risks has begun to affect sales. In desperation,
Don consults Dr. Greta Guttmann—a heavy-handed caricature of a Viennese psychiatrist—who suggests that Freud’s theory of a ‘death wish’ could be utilised in the campaign. Smoking is dangerous she argues, but people secretly crave danger. Don immediately rejects this approach as ‘perverse’. As an advocate of the pleasure principle, he is committed to an ego-affirming philosophy of advertising. Yet Dr. Guttmann’s musings establish a psychological subtext for the series. Freud had seen the death drive as a primary masochism that manifests in the repetition of painful and destructive experiences (Freud, 2002). In his mature thought, it served as a counterpoint to utilitarian theories of human nature that were built solely upon the pursuit of pleasure. For the series as a whole, the introduction of the death drive functions like Chekhov’s gun. It sets the stage for a pessimistic worldview that questions the capacity of people to truly know themselves and affect meaningful change, and ultimately undermines popular correlations between the advance of civilisation and personal happiness. Following the meeting, Don takes a nap on the couch in his office. Punctuated by the sounds of bomb blasts, his tortured dreams are the first in a series of testimonies to the ideas of Dr. Guttmann.

Without an idea to pitch, Don’s meeting with Lucky Strike quickly deteriorates. Ever the opportunist, the young account manager Pete Campbell offers up Dr. Guttmann’s theories. Appalled, Lee Garner Sr., the owner of Lucky Strike, reduces this macabre pitch to its essence: ‘That’s your slogan? You’re going to die anyway. Die with us?’ The Lucky Strike executives prepare to leave before Don, in a moment of inspiration, hits upon the slogan ‘Lucky Strike: It’s Toasted’. Where Dr. Gutmann’s approach was born of matter-of-fact realism and psychological honesty, Don’s is born from distraction. He explains to the tobacco executives:

> Advertising is based on one thing: happiness. And do you know what happiness is? Happiness is the smell of a new car. It’s freedom from fear. It is a billboard on the side of the road that screams with reassurance whatever you are doing is okay. You are okay.

Don argues the goal of advertising is not to make you aware of uncomfortable truths. Successful ads provide a sense of security and thereby draw the consumer closer to the ever elusive goal of happiness. Don and his colleagues are selling more than just the indigenous properties of their products; they are integrating them into a wider story of American life.
Through the mediation of advertising, everyday commodities are fetishised, starting off as mundane objects before being transformed into facets of the American Dream.

For the Lucky Strike executives, this transformative process is merely pragmatic. ‘It’s Toasted’ is a comforting illusion that will allow them to hawk their wares to a gullible and unsuspecting public. They exemplify the world of C. Wright Mills’ *The Power Elite* (1956) and Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957). Theirs is a world of manipulative techniques and corporate conspiracies aimed at the hearts and minds of America. On a personal level, the corporate world is depicted as an almost ritualistic transgression of the moral order. Account Managers herd their clients into meeting rooms by day, before plying them with women and alcohol at night. New York, for many, functions as a wanton respite from the family home. As the series progresses, prostitution becomes an overarching metaphor for wider commercial life. In season five, when the office manager Joan Holloway agrees to spend a night with a sleazy client in exchange for a company partnership, the metaphorical has become literal. The show explicitly suggesting that every facet of the individual and firm is available for sale at the appropriate price. Juxtaposed to the venality of business life, the world as advertised is bitterly ironic.

Through the Lucky Strike campaign, *Mad Men* establishes the first, but least significant, of its critical lenses. The elites have failed as cultural stewards. They have succumbed to greed and self-entitlement and no longer act with the ethical responsibility incumbent of their position. Starting from this ideological premise, the show gradually relaxes into a wider and more organic portrait of American life. Taken as a whole, *Mad Men* is more interested in the moral, psychological and cultural tensions that beset the middle class than in providing an extended critique of the wider economic order. Yet the cynical portrait of Corporate America, exemplified in the Lucky Strike campaign, fruitfully establishes a disjuncture between the images provided by the mass media and the reality of lived experience.

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7 Lee Garner Sr.’s characterisation as a Robber Barron is evident in his remarks: ‘We’re sellin’ America. The Indians gave it to us for shit’s sake’ and ‘Manipulation of the media? That’s what I pay you for’.

8 The analogy is established in the first episode when Don is asked to patch up a relationship with a client. An accounts executive beseeches ‘she is worth three million dollars’ to which Don responds ‘you’re a whore’. More specific examples emerge throughout the series. In season one, Pete Campbell suggests his wife sleep with an ex-boyfriend to secure the publication of a short story he wrote. In season three, the repressed homosexual Sal Romano is fired after refusing the advances of Lucky Strike’s Lee Garner Jr. Don makes it clear he should have complied due to the size of the Lucky Strike account.
The series probes what Daniel Boorstin in *The Image* (1961) referred to as pseudo-events; the advertising copy and public relations strategies that shape our image of the good life. Through the intercession of the mass-media, Boorstin argues that life is increasingly lived vicariously. The world as advertised becomes both a source of extravagant expectations and a ubiquitous critical mirror. Boorstin writes: ‘We suffer primarily not from our vices or weaknesses, but from our illusions. We are haunted, not by reality, but by those images we have put in place of reality’ (Boorstin, 1987: 6). Through Don’s advertising pitches, *Mad Men* follows a process of repackaging and rearticulating the 1950s domestic ideal against the nascent cultural revolutions of the 1960s. There is an overarching cynicism in the series that questions the substance behind the images that are being produced. From cigarettes to presidential candidates, the branding of products exposes the process of fetishisation, thereby uncoupling the spin from the material content. In the process, cultural decay is documented through the increasing dominance of style over anything of enduring substance.

From the opening salvos against corporate America, the pursuit of money and power are ultimately shown to be the consequences of deeper needs. New business is typically pursued not from greed but from love of the chase and the exhilaration it brings to otherwise deadened lives. Indeed, there is little correlation between the rising fortunes of the firm and any sense of lasting happiness for its stakeholders. Whilst a sense of vocation remains central, the obsession with work often emerges as a compensation for the impoverishment of other facets of life. When anything from marital strife to the wider issues of political violence and the threat of nuclear annihilation that mired the 1960s present themselves, work emerges as a way of allaying the sense of confusion and fear that pervades individual lives. At these times, the office becomes a sanctuary where personal devotion can create a sphere of order amidst the external chaos that threatens to engulf them.

For the masses, reality is seen to be less desirable than appearances. ‘Freedom from Fear’ is a reassuring guide, walking consumers though the anxiety-ridden landscape of modern America. In the process, personal autonomy and its correlative anxieties are relinquished for the comfort and security of governing narratives. Understanding the poisoned chalice of freedom, Don later explains, ‘people want to be told what to do so badly they will listen to anyone’. Taking their cues from advertising, consumers are want to focus upon the ‘smell of a new car’ or next piece in the consumer puzzle that assures them they are okay. In *Mad Men*, the edicts of Madison Avenue lead towards the yawning passivity of Nietzsche’s last man.
Yet against Nietzsche’s diagnosis, and following critics like Riesman and Whyte, the series argues that this consumerist utopia has produced its own forms of anxiety. Advertising constructs a narrative where happiness is to be found in the next purchase or latest fad. Following on from this, the other-directed consumer is beset by anxiety over fitting in, of cultivating the appropriate lifestyle and emotional connections to people and things that guaranteed happiness. Having purchased all the accoutrements to a successful life, the characters in *Mad Men* find lived experience continually falls short of what was advertised on the box.

The stakes are higher for Don. His ‘freedom from fear’ pitch emerges directly from enduring tensions within his character. First there is his alpha-male persona. Within his competitive milieu, Don gains satisfaction by bringing people and problems under his command. On this level, his pitches are satisfying as actualisations of his will. However, a second, deeper need is also expressed. Through his work, Don pitches to himself as much as to the public. During his moments of creative brilliance an emotional warmth and readiness for life kindle behind his cold and detached exterior. Caught up in the beauty and simplicity of these pitches, his critical faculty is momentarily suspended and the problems of the world fall away. During his pitches, he can almost believe in the stories he tells and their promise to broach the distance between his personal isolation and the world. These moments are invariably followed by the return of his urbane cynicism. As the spell begins to wane, he emotionally withdraws from these images, representing them to his colleagues as the artful productions of an advertising virtuoso. Despite his renewed detachment, a mournful connection remains. The magic of the Lucky Strike campaign required its audience to be oblivious to distraction. While the best of Don’s work transfigures the everyday world suffusing it with meaning, he remains aware that if the anxieties of life need the soothing veil of illusion, then to truly be happy one must also be quixotic.

Following his successful pitch to Lucky Strike, Don has dinner with Rachel Mencken, a Jewish Department Store owner and prospective client. Amidst conversational pleasantries, Don asks why she is not married. Rachel replies that she finds business to be a thrill and besides she has never been in love:

Don: “She won’t get married because she’s never been in love.” I think I wrote that. It was to sell nylons.
Rachel: For a lot of people, love isn’t just a slogan.
Don: Oh, you mean “love”. You mean the big lightning bolt to the heart, where you can’t eat and you can’t work, and you just run off and get married and make babies? The reason you haven’t felt it is because it doesn’t exist. What you call love was invented by guys like me to sell nylons.

Rachel: Is that right?
Don: I’m pretty sure about it. You’re born alone and you die alone and this world just drops a bunch of rules on top of you to make you forget those facts, but I never forget. I’m living like there’s no tomorrow, because there isn’t one.

Don’s nihilism shatters the bright and ordered surface of his world. If love, the most redemptive of human emotions and kernel of civilisation is merely an illusion, then the world is a lie. As a mouthpiece for Nietzsche’s Death of God, Don declares conventional morality exists to make us forget the unpalatable truth that life is meaningless. In the *Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Albert Camus located a possible response to this sense of meaninglessness in the story of Don Juan. For Don Juan, the inevitability of death intensifies the will to life. Accepting the limits of his existence, he lives to draw all the potential pleasures from each moment. Life is loved for its repetitions; the thrills that accompany each conquest. His is ‘an existence turned towards short-lived joys’ (Camus, 1983: 76). Don Juan’s is not the love of the Romantics, the yearning for the transcendent epitomised in John Keats’ *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1819). Like Don Draper, he knows this love is ‘clothed in the illusion of the eternal’ (Camus: 1983: 73). Don Juan accepts the realities of the world and the inevitability of decay as the necessary staging for his passions. He possesses an innate vitality and sense of mirth that allows him to move through life undaunted by its glaring absurdities. Ostensibly, Don Draper sides with Don Juan. He presents himself as an enlightened hedonist, courageous in the face of death whilst busily experiencing everything life has to offer. In reality, his story is less about affirmation than decay. While initially fevered in his pursuit of pleasure, he doesn’t find Don Juan’s worldly contentment only frustrated hopes, waning desire and despair.

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9 Eros as a foundation of civilisation is elaborated in Freud’s tension between Thanatos and Eros in *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (2002). It is also a recurrent theme in poetic visions of civilisation; see, for instance, W. H. Auden’s *In Memory of Sigmund Freud*: ‘Sad is Eros, builder of cities’ (Auden, 1979: 95).
10 On the transcendent sense of love expressed in John Keats’ *Ode on a Grecian Urn* see, for instance: ‘Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss, / Though winning near the goal – yet, do not grieve: / She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss, / For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!’ (Keats, 2003: 17–20).
As a Jewess in a male Anglo world, Rachel tells Don she doesn’t know what he really believes in, but she knows what it feels like to be disconnected, ‘to see the whole world laid out in front of you, the way other people live it’. Portrayed deftly by actor John Hamm, Don’s eyes for a moment take on a haunted and vulnerable expression before hardening once again. His nihilistic eloquence in part seems to have been an exercise in self-deception. The conversation has exposed a glimpse of the animating demons behind his confident exterior. Don may not believe in love, but in a cynical and fallen way, he will continually pursue it. Ironically, Camus admired Don Juan for his honesty. Behind his love of seduction, Don Juan accepted the world was absurd and had purged himself of hope. In contrast, Don’s detached hedonism masks an ardent need for communion. He is looking for a foothold in a world that he has rationally kicked to pieces. It is a search that will take him through the normative values and standards of his time, probing them through the artistic insight and embellishment of his advertising campaigns and through his own lived experience. Starting from a position of doubt, he will play the role of devil’s advocate to Middle America.

Following his meeting with Rachel, Don joins a host of white-collar commuters on their way to the suburbs. His final stop for the night is an inviting family home replete with wife and children. After greeting his wife, Don checks on his sleeping children. The scene links back to the Lucky Strike pitch through a visual debt to Norman Rockwell’s Freedom from Fear (1943). In Rockwell’s vision, parents lovingly watch over their sleeping children. The father’s paper brings news of horror and war but these worries have been left at the door. The home remains a haven; it is a place of untroubled sleep. Rockwell’s sugary peon to the innocence of family life stands diametrically opposed to Don’s nihilistic credo. His paintings follow men and women whose hearts and minds are not so hardened by cynicism that they cannot be touched by the warmth of emotion. Rockwell would respond to Don that there may be enduring sadness in the world, but it is softened by these moments of grace.

In Mad Men’s redaction of this image there are signs of discord. While Don tucks his children in, his wife Betty watches on from the doorway. Her distance from the scene is an early indication of her own self-absorption. The belated introduction of Betty and the children further undermines the poignancy of the moment. By following a day in Don’s life, the pilot episode makes it clear that while Don’s name may be on the bills, he doesn’t really live here. Despite this, Don reaches out in earnest to embrace his children. The scene appears as one of
his advertising dreams given life and now awaiting his return. His heartfelt connection is followed by a more pensive look. The American Dream in flesh and blood touches a chord within, but it is not enough to hold him. Unable to commit to, or feel fully at home in any aspect of his life, his character remains unstable: the brilliant advertising executive, nihilist, hedonist and family man all prowl around inside him. The final shot of the episode pushes back from this image of domestic bliss, out a window and away from the home. It is an inversion of the opening sequence of *Father Knows Best*.

Throughout the remainder of the first season, the question ‘who is Don Draper?’ is further complicated. Through a series of flashbacks it emerges that Don is actually Dick Whitman, the illegitimate child of a drunken Midwestern farmer and a prostitute. Desperate to escape the poverty and trauma of his youth, he enlisted in the Korean War. Following the death of the real lieutenant Draper, Dick stole his dog tags and assumed his identity. In this moment of opportunistic self-creation, the horrors of the past were seemingly shed for the promise of a brighter future. In the process, Dick Whitman, the awkward and recalcitrant farm boy was transformed into the supremely confident and charismatic Don Draper. It is a story that follows in a long line of American tales of overcoming the past through self-reinvention. Symbolically, from the time of the first settlers, America promised freedom from the persecutions and prejudices of the fatherland.11 The promise of the frontier established a fertile tension in the American imagination between the fatalisms of its Puritan tradition that maintained the reality of inherited sin and the romantic vision of America as a new Eden, a place where one could innocently begin anew.12

The exemplar of the romantic ideal is F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Like Don, Gatsby is the son of a Midwestern farmer. He was born Jay Gatz, but Gatsby ‘sprang from a platonic conception of himself’ (Fitzgerald, 1990: 95). ‘There was something gorgeous about him’ Fitzgerald writes, he possessed a ‘romantic readiness’ and a ‘heightened sensitivity to the promises of life’ (1990: 8). Through his act of self-creation Gatsby became a figurehead for the American belief in the possibility of reinvention and renewal. His tragedy lies in the fragility and ultimate collapse of this dream when exposed to the procrustean

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11 For the earliest Americans the move to the New World was symbolically an expression of cultural patricide, a renunciation of the fatherland in favour of a new beginning. For an extended analysis of this theme in American culture see Geoffrey Gorer’s *The Americans* (1948).

12 For an extensive examination of the dialectic between romantic and Calvinistic notion of character in American literature see R. W. B. Lewis’ *The American Adam* (1955).
realities of the world. For Fitzgerald, this archetypally American story was part of ‘the history of aspiration—not just the American Dream but the human dream’ (Fitzgerald as cited in Turnbull, 2001: 307). Gatsby embodies the universal hope for a better tomorrow where the desires of the heart may be fully realised. His vision is a romantic complement to the materialist success narratives of Horatio Alger. In Gatsby, Fitzgerald gave expression to the sense of manifold possibilities contained within the American constitutional right to ‘the pursuit of happiness’. In contrast, the narrator Nick Caraway charts the course of a disenchanted life. Nick’s defining trait is his honesty. Unable to dream like Gatsby, he retreats into the stale mores of his provincial hometown. Turning thirty, the same age as Hamlet, he reflects:

Thirty—the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning brief-case of enthusiasms, thinning hair… So we drove on towards death through the cooling twilight.

(Fitzgerald, 1990: 129)

The reality that confronts Nick is the inevitability of disillusionment and waning vitality. Nick realises that with time the protean and romantic aspects of our nature harden. Rebirth becomes less possible, and even less desirable, as atrophy succeeds ‘the promise of life’ and the horizon of the possible retracts.

While echoing Gatsby, Don’s dreaming is a far more modest enterprise. From the start, he lacks a guiding sense of purpose; his wartime transformation more a product of happenstance than of any unifying vision or deliberate affirmation. Without strong attachments, he drifts through life garnering facets of his self-image from advertisements and popular culture. This openness to cultural cues is what makes him brilliant at his job. In constantly constructing his identity, Don is sorting through cultural fragments in order to fashion a cohesive whole. The existential insecurity at the heart of this project is a heightened expression of that faced by the modern consumer. Tied to his search for meaning, Don’s pitches captivate because they tap into his culture’s deepest yearnings. Ultimately, his life is exposed as a collection of bright facets that lack a unifying core. In season three, when Betty becomes suspicious of his past, she rifles through his possessions: ‘I went through every pocket and every drawer’ she declares, ‘and there’s nothing… All I found were stacks of cocktail napkins with stupid advertising slogans on them’.
In *Mad Men*, the Gatsby dream is ultimately exposed as quixotic, liveable only at the most naïve and immature level. Yet despite the cynicism that comes with maturity, elements of the dream remain. The world of *Mad Men* is haunted by images of hope, from the Greek idea of utopia, to hippie communes and references to the Shangri-La of Frank Capra’s *Lost Horizon* (1937). Despite the overwhelming sense of despair, the main characters cling to Gatsbyesque hopes, that life at all of its stages is ripe for renewal and that the best is yet to come. However, reality is shown to be closer to the brutal honesty of Nick Caraway. Despite hopes to the contrary, people seem incapable of making any meaningful changes in their lives. While there are moments of jubilant success, temporary triumphs fade when the same insecurities and character flaws continue to manifest. The hoped for and elusive future remains just that. In terms of personal development, time in *Mad Men* has more of a cyclical quality than a linear sense of heading towards any meaningful goal.

**Suburban Disenchantment**

Pivotal to Don’s sense of detachment is his awareness of the hollowness of the suburban ideal. On his daughter’s birthday, Don spends the morning laboriously assembling a flat-packed playhouse. He drinks heavily throughout, trying to drown the obvious associations with his own fabricated life. The ensuing party echoes the bland homogeneity and narrow interests of suburban life that have been derided by novelists and social critics alike. Like domestic comedies, *Mad Men* depicts suburbia as a mood and ethos as much as a geographic locale. Yet the warmth and poetic quality *Father Knows Best* found in order, intimacy and repetition is entirely absent. Behind the Drapers’ white picket fence lies an underbelly of alcoholism, infidelity and quiet desperation. In *Father Knows Best*, suburbia was seen to be the fruition of the American Dream. In *Mad Men*, it is its failure: a symbol of how the pursuit of happiness has degraded into a narrow pursuit of creature comfort and security. Ostensibly, the suburbanites are living the dream. At the party, a guest declares, ‘We got it all huh?’ as he gestures around the well-appointed living room. ‘Yep this is it’, Don half-heartedly replies before the conversation peters out. They have reached the summit of the suburban narrative, yet they remain troublingly dissatisfied.
For the men, conversation turns to wartime experiences. *Mad Men* follows in a long line of American filmic and literary juxtapositions of war with the suburban pastoral. At war, the men experienced courage, honour and excitement to a degree that grates against the limited emotional pitch and well-ordered pleasures of suburban life. Despite its accompanying horrors, war had provided a sense of *élan vital*. It had quickened the blood and made them feel truly alive. However, these wartime experiences proved untranslatable into civilian life. The result was a deep sense of ambivalence. On one level, the comfort and order of suburbia functioned as a balm for minds haunted by the horrors of war. On another level, wartime experience made this sheltered environment seem stale, artificial and even absurd. The comfort and civility of suburbia was tainted by an enduring sense of the chthonic forces that lay below its surface. Through its use of this juxtaposition, *Mad Men* provides an acute portrait of the post-war anxiety over waning masculinity outlined by Riesman and Whyte. Suburbia is unsatisfying because it is dominated by leisure and consumption and fails to provide adequate sublimations for competitive and aggressive drives. The men inhabit this space, but they are dissatisfied, finding they are only really able to express their essential qualities whilst away at work.

In the kitchen, the women’s discussion revolves around honeymoons and romantic ideals. These nostalgic reveries are peppered with innocuous complaints about their present lives. A divorcée is the subject of spite, her rejection of marital conventions as irritating as the temptation she presents to their husbands. Throughout the afternoon, the women deride her homemaking skills while the men gaze lustfully after her. Together, their lives are a portrait of frustration, irksome conventions and an absence of any appreciable zest or imagination. There is a festering discontent behind their bickering, lust and youthful recollections. The smiling face of the suburbs appears to demand happiness from its constituents. Those that feel excluded from the contentment they see all around them are left with a sense that they are flawed, that somehow they are squandering the promise that has been afforded them. For those that can see beyond the prison of inherited standards, there is a greater sense of emptiness in the recognition that perhaps this is all there is and that everyone is either ignorant of the fact or complicit in a lie, pretending not to notice that this is not enough.

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14 Borrowing from Nietzsche’s concept of the will to power, the term was popularised by Henri Bergson in *Creative Evolution* (1907/1944).
At the heart of the suburban malaise is the absence of any sense of transcendence. *Mad Men* depicts a generation waking up to middle age and confronting the gulf between their youthful fantasies and the realities of the world. Forgoing individual desires to settle down, they have followed the normative path that was meant to lead to happiness but have found none. The boredom of the present is further compounded by a dim sense that the best years of their lives have already passed them by. *Mad Men’s* suburban ennui, like Thomas Mann’s portrait of bourgeois decadence, is part of a wider story of waning class vitality. The show charts how each generation finds it harder to follow in the course of the previous one. How instinctive certainty gives way to hollow imitation as the reasons behind beliefs and customs grow feeble. As Don’s generation gropes for meaning, personal frustration and self-suspicion are directed outwards, punishing the errant aspects of themselves which they see in others who have strayed from the path. They are zealously social but live in isolation, unable to speak of their private despair and shame. Yet their path to disillusionment is paved with distractions. The new car, a romantic getaway, the country club all manage to temporarily excite and occupy time. Outside fleeting moments of acute despair, their lives are only dimly touched by sorrow. It is the life mood of a people, who lacking in the language of tragedy, can still manage to keep themselves somewhat assured of their own happiness.

As the birthday party continues, Don records a home video. Looking on at life through the lens, he captures the innocent play of children and the perfunctory smiles of the guests before pausing on a couple kissing. This solitary moment of genuine warmth and affection cuts through the bright but meaningless veneer of suburban life. The kiss simultaneously redeems the possibility of this life while exposing his impoverished form of it. With a mixture of wistfulness and self-disgust, he heads outside where he watches the children imitating adulthood in the playhouse. Their conversation, ‘You dented the car… I like sleeping on the couch… I don’t like your tone’, an innocent witness to the commonplace realities of adult life. When Don has an empathetic moment with the divorcée, Betty jealously sends him to pick up the birthday cake. Unable to face returning to the party, he escapes for hours, parking his car before an isolated railway crossing. Pensively he watches trains hurtle away down the line. He returns home late that night with a pet dog for his daughter, the perfect symbol for his loyalty and renewed commitment. On a more idealistic level, the dog is perhaps the missing piece in his image of the happy family home. Don wishes his daughter a happy
birthday before drunkenly collapsing on the couch while Betty, mortified by the damage to their public image, seethes in the kitchen.

Betty’s frustrations are typical of what Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1962) labelled ‘the problem that has no name’ (1962: 1). Appalled by the contemporary image of the homemaker, Friedan railed against the psychologists, sociologists, educators and especially advertisers who had resurrected the ideal of the Victorian Angel under the guise of pseudo-scientific fact and immutable biological truths.\(^{15}\) Collectively, she held them responsible for the pervasive belief that women would only find happiness through devotion to family and home. Friedan charted how a generation of women, raised on the images of domestic bliss, suffered from anxiety and painful disillusionment when their lives proved less fulfilling than expected. After falling into the suburban trap and its promise of the good life, they were haunted by a voice within that said, ‘I want something more than my husband, my children and my home’ (1962: 11). Like Friedan’s homemakers, Betty finds that behind the glossy images of the happy-homemaker, a life devoted to family and home is bland and unfulfilling. She tries everything she can think of to shake off her indefinable sense of malaise, but nothing fills the void inside. Increasingly anxious, she suffers psychosomatic numbness in her hands. Her symptoms manifest in moments that confirm her helplessness; the sight of the divorcee unpacking her car all alone or in situations that reveal how little she knows about her husband.

After these symptoms cause her to crash her car, Betty is referred to Dr. Wayne, a psychiatrist and exemplar of everything Friedan disdained. Throughout their sessions, Betty’s thoughts continually return to her recently deceased mother. ‘She wanted me to be beautiful’ Betty recalls, ‘so I could find a man. There is nothing wrong with that but what then? Just sit and smoke and let it go until you’re in a box.’ Dr. Wayne, a caricature of mid-century values, treats her with condescension. His attitude echo wider society’s faith in its governing narratives, in his belief that Betty has everything she could possibly desire. Ultimately, he dismisses her concerns as evidence of a lack of maturity. He reports to Don, ‘you have to

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\(^{15}\) Friedan saw the advertising industry as the most culpable perpetuator of the feminine mystique: ‘It is their [advertisers] millions which blanket the land with persuasive images, flattering the American housewife, diverting her guilt and disguising her growing emptiness. They have done this so successfully, employing the techniques and concepts of modern social science, and transposing them into those deceptively simple, clever, outrageous ads and commercials, that an observer of the American scene today accepts as fact that the great majority of American women have no ambition other than to be housewives. If they are not responsible for sending women home, they are surely responsible for keeping them there’ (Friedan, 1963: 218-219).
understand, basically, we’re dealing with the emotions of a child here’. The diagnosis is damning. By infantilising Betty, both men fail to acknowledge the existential angst and gender-based fatalism at the heart of her quiet despair.16

For other women in the show, the 1960s offer more opportunities. Rejecting, at least while they are young, the deterministic patterns of suburbia, they embrace the excitement and opportunities of life in New York. ‘The city is everything’ office manager Joan Holloway tells Peggy Olson. Yet despite their sense of freedom, Betty Friedan’s ‘Feminine Mystique’ hangs like a pall over their lives. Through the contrasting careers of Joan and Peggy, the series follows how female hopes and ambitions are both shaped and constrained by the masculine culture of the workplace. They exist on the cusp of second-wave feminism, in a period where the governing female narratives are falling out of fashion, but nothing has emerged to take their place.17 On Peggy’s first day in the office, Joan initiates her into the realities of working life. She tells Peggy to make a critical inventory of her attractive features and then dress to highlight them before referring her to a gynaecologist who will prescribe the pill. Joan explains:

In a couple of years, with the right moves, you'll be in the city with the rest of us. Of course, if you really make the right moves, you'll be out in the country and you won't be going to work at all.

Confident, worldly and seductive, Joan is the office siren, sashaying around in stylish but deliberately provocative attire. Capitalising on her looks, she encourages the attention of a range of men who shower her with gifts and compliments. In season one, she has a tryst with Roger Sterling who offers to support her. He buys her a caged bird as a pet, yet she wants to remain free. However, as she moves into her thirties, she grows tired of the party-girl life. At work, she watches Peggy’s rising fortunes with a mixture of jealously and bemusement, the idea of competing on an equal footing with men seemingly never having occurred to her. Throughout the series, they are juxtaposed as female types, one who will trade on her beauty

16 Dr. Wayne’s treatment of Betty’s existential concerns as childlike is typically Freudian. In The Future of an Illusion Freud maintains the religious impulse is a product of the infantile yearning for parental protection: ‘The defence against childish helplessness is what lends its characteristic features to the adult’s reaction to the helplessness which he has to acknowledge - a reaction which is precisely the formation of religion’ (Freud, 1962: 30).

the other on her talent. They are in part envious of one another; Peggy longs for Joan’s confidence and sexual appeal while Joan marvels at Peggy’s ability to breakthrough established feminine moulds.

Unable to move beyond traditional narratives, Joan’s dreams remain tied to making a successful marriage. She meets Greg Harris, a handsome young doctor at the beginning of a promising career. Yet, as with most of the relationships in Mad Men, the idyllic surface hides a rotten core. Greg soon begins to feel threatened by Joan’s worldly past. After sensing her overfamiliarity with Roger, he pins her down and rapes her on Don’s office floor. A close-up shows her face paralysed with shock before cutting to her staring at the wall in a desperate attempt at disassociation. In one brutal moment, the confidence and self-empowerment derived from her sexuality has been degraded into a sense of powerlessness and shame.

The following day as Peggy celebrates a promotion, she tells Joan her fiancé is ‘a keeper’. Joan smiles and replies that he does charity work and that they are planning a Christmas wedding. Her sense of pride coupled with a desperate attempt to hold on to her dreams shields her from extended engagement with reality. They are married in the third season, but after Greg fails a surgeon’s exam, he enlists for service in Vietnam and the marriage slowly falls apart. Tellingly, his career failures are coincident with Joan becoming integral to Sterling Cooper’s success. With bitter irony the series suggests she was always far more capable than her mediocre husband. After they divorce, Joan is left in the precarious position of being a single mother. At the bequest of Pete Campbell, she sleeps with a sleazy Jaguar executive in exchange for a company partnership. It is an act of resignation. Since her divorce she had been trying to find ways to be appreciated beyond her looks. She had made inroads, proving to be a quick thinking and talented office manager. However, like the majority of the characters on Mad Men, she is held in bondage to her past. Her decision to prostitute herself is made with the belated recognition that she has been playing the role of a siren for so long that she is unlikely to be offered any other parts.

18 Typical of Mad Men Joan will relive this trauma. In series four, while arguing with a particularly disrespectful male employee she is asked ‘what do you do around here besides walking around like you’re trying to get raped?’
In contrast to Joan, Peggy heralds the rise of a new female type: the career woman. Peggy arrives at the office as an intelligent but naïve and highly impressionable young woman. Her hometown Bay Ridge, in the south of Brooklyn, is depicted as a typical working-class Catholic community, organised around family, church and neighbourhood. It is an exemplar of oppressive monotony: the men are underemployed and lack ambition, while the women dream of nothing beyond marriage and children. Together, they are marked by a lack of imagination and a passive acceptance of the world as received. Wanting more from life, Peggy’s career aspirations soon alienate her family and friends, who accuse her of becoming snobbish and affected. Undaunted she replies, ‘those people in Manhattan are better than us, because they want things they haven’t seen’. Peggy’s initiation into Manhattan life occurs on her first day as the men of the office circle around her in a predatory fashion, vying to be the first to seduce the new girl. Coming from a sheltered background and unused to such a direct approach, she is both shocked and flattered by their attention. Initially, she follows Joan’s advice, awkwardly offering herself to Don, who rejects her and later sleeping with Pete Campbell.

However, Peggy distinguishes herself from the other women in the office during a focus group for Belle Jolie lipstick. While the other women giggle and chatter simplistically, Peggy struggles with the girlish context. When asked what she thinks of the lipstick, her poetic turn of phrase establishes her creative potential. Seeing something of himself in her, Don makes her a junior copywriter, a role that had only been filled by men since the war. Her first creative successes are met with amazement: ‘It was like watching a dog play piano’, a male colleague declares. His incredulity sets the pattern for the discrimination and unwitting prejudice she faces whilst trying to break through the glass ceiling of the business world. Her struggles are compounded by a lack of role models. Having broken away from the secretarial pool, she occupies a liminal space between traditional female roles and those conventionally reserved for men. Consequently, she remains caught between conflicting influences and standards and struggles to consolidate her identity. When her male colleagues prepare a new advertising strategy for brassieres their inspiration is two female types: Marilyn Monroe (the siren) and Jackie Kennedy (the glamorous and demure homemaker). Their reductive typology highlights the absence in the early 1960s of a female role model that embodies career ambitions, intelligence and independence. Unconvinced by the campaign Peggy asks ‘which do you think I am?’ The men snicker after one responds ‘Gertrude Stein’.
Further emphasising the misogynistic office culture, Peggy is ridiculed for gaining weight throughout the series. After suffering abdominal pains, she heads to hospital where she learns she is pregnant. Having repressed knowledge of her pregnancy, when the child is born she refuses to acknowledge it and suffers an emotional breakdown. She is interred in a psychiatric ward where she is visited by Don. His advice is pure Gatsby: ‘Peggy listen to me, get out of here and move forward. This never happened. It will shock you how much it never happened.’ The experience is a turning point in her life and she returns to work with a focus and maturity that belies her years. Her story will ultimately chart the emergence of an alternative female narrative to the siren and the homemaker.

Male identity is similarly shown to be in transition. At one end of the generational spectrum, the Captains of Industry, like Conrad Hilton and the firm’s founder Burt Cooper, are archetypal self-made men, espousing an ethic of rugged individualism, relentless striving and competition. For the succeeding generations, they remain an exemplar of forceful masculinity that is capable of wresting fortune and success from the world. However, for the younger men at the office, the path to success has become more obscure. Echoing widespread concerns in the 1950s and 1960s, *Mad Men* charts how the growth of corporate bureaucracies meant that the classic Protestant virtues were no longer enough. In order to be successful, the modern businessman had to manage the impressions of others as much as his forefathers had managed themselves. Riesman painted a portrait of corporate ‘glad-handers’, conducting their business with a smile and dependent on making a positive impression on clients and their superiors for their success (1950: 113). The modern organisation man had to be well spoken, well liked, flexible in his opinions and always ready to negotiate a workable middle ground. For sociologists of the era, like Riesman, Whyte and Mills, organisational life fostered a crisis of masculinity. They saw bourgeois masculine traits being succeeded by an emphasis on interpersonal sensitivity, tolerance and cooperation—traits traditionally associated with femininity and the private sphere. While they acknowledged that organisational life produced more affluent Americans than ever before, they feared that this life was giving rise to anxious, manipulative, and ultimately emasculated men.

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19 For an extended account of the anxiety over the waning of the Protestant Ethic in mid-century American culture see James Gilbert’s *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (2005).
As a junior executive, Pete Campbell embodies the beleaguered masculinity of the new organisation man. Desperate to bolster his self-worth, he tells his brother ‘I’m very important to the agency. My absence is felt.’ However, when his doctor remarks, ‘working in advertising must be a lot of fun’, Pete confesses:

Are you kidding? I’m an account man. I spend half my day tiptoeing around creative cry-babies and the other half drinking with ungrateful turnips who just fell off the truck. I’m completely replaceable, even though I just brought in a huge account.

He continues by voicing a host of concerns—the threat of nuclear annihilation, the recent death of his father, fear of sexual impotency, the prospect of fatherhood, workplace redundancy—that contribute to his constant sense of anxiety. Throughout his life he feels hemmed in by traditional narratives of career, marriage, homeownership and parenthood. They are perpetual reminders that he is not in control of his fate. When at work, he associates with the other young executives. Together, they form a boys’ club of chauvinism, bravado and exaggerated accounts of work and sexual conquests. Their posturing is all male fantasy, a mask for workplace insecurities and an escape from the dreary reality of suburban life. Pete attempts to imitate the behaviour of Don, yet there is something more forced, more desperate and less commanding about his performance. Lacking Don’s charisma and self-reliance, he wears his masculinity like an ill-fitting suit.

Pete’s problems at the office are further compounded by a sense of emasculation at home. Soon after getting married, he is harried by his wife into returning a chip ‘n’ dip that was received as a duplicate wedding present. While his male colleagues drink at a local bar, he joins a line of women waiting to be served at a department store. A chance encounter with a charismatic acquaintance from his school days heightens his sense of emasculation. Pete watches him effortlessly flirt with the women at the exchange counter before attempting to ply his own charms. The sales attendant remains unmoved. She refuses his request for a refund and only offers him store credit. Embittered by this obvious sign of his lack of male potency, he exchanges the chip ‘n’ dip for a .22 calibre rifle. Returning to work he aims down the rifle scope at the women in the office in a joint fantasy of conquest and annihilation. Although his wife tells him to return his ‘stupid toy’, he keeps it at the office, the only place that is close to being a sanctuary for his besieged manhood. When Peggy asks about the gun,
Pete relays a frontier fantasy of killing a deer and carrying it back to his log cabin where his dutiful wife would cook it and then watch him eat.

Pete struggles to live up to inherited masculine ideals: the self-made man, the hard-drinking womaniser, even the more modest but still authoritative male bread-winner all remain beyond his grasp. He is drawn to strong masculine presences, whether frontier fantasies, cowboy automotive executives, or the heroes in films like John Ford’s *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962). Throughout, he is constantly judging himself against masculine standards and embittered by falling short. Pete’s tragedy is that he is not the kind of man he wants to be. Ironically, despite failing as an alpha-male, he is brilliant at his work. In Riesman’s sense, he has mastered other-directed organisational life. He is adept at adjusting his attitudes and idiom to the requirements of the situation and is able to manipulate others with a flattering turn of phrase. Yet failing to live up to perceived standards, he remains anxious and insecure. He is cruel and demeaning to his subordinates and obsequious to his seniors. In *Mad Men*, the rise of the organisational bureaucracies, an inability to comfortably identify with masculine role models and feminism’s disruption of established gender spheres, all lead to the anxieties that Riesman and Whyte had charted as the male analogue to the feminine mystique.

**The Fall**

Once the contours of Don’s world have been established, the series focuses on his growing sense of discontent. First there is his family life. Despite moments of genuine affection, Don and Betty’s marriage is mired in divergent interests, self-obsession and a lack of genuine communication. When not working, Don is rarely at home, seemingly more interested in drinking and womanising his way through the bars of Manhattan. When he is at home, Betty provides little stimulation beyond her physical beauty; her conversation for the most part incapable of rising beyond domestic platitudes. Frustrated by her shallow-mindedness, Don laments that it is like living with a child. In search of a more meaningful connection, he is drawn to Rachel Menken. In contrast to Betty, Rachel is intellectual, worldly and independent. She is also an outsider, yet unlike Don she possesses a strong sense of self. Following an impulsive kiss, their relationship cools when Don confesses that he is married. Don’s affair with Midge had been more of a libertine coupling than a shared sense of deep
affinity. However, in Rachel he believes he has found someone with whom he can truly be himself.

Rachel explains to Don that her people have lived in exile for millennia. Yet they have maintained a sense of identity that has thrived within a hostile and alien environment. She tells him how important the idea of a homeland is for the Jewish people. For her it is more of an idea than a place. ‘Utopia’ Don coos as he clasps her hand. The idea appeals to the Gatsby element of his character, the possibility of complete fulfilment. More circumspect, Rachel tells him that at university she learnt the etymology of utopia: ‘The Greeks had two meanings for it: Eu-topos meaning the good place, and u-topos, meaning the place that cannot be.’ The exchange is accompanied by a series of intimate close-ups. For a moment, utopia is the possibility of them being together. However, Don is married and Rachel is under pressure to marry within her faith. Resigned, they go their separate ways.

Later, when Roger Sterling suffers a heart attack, Don visits him in hospital. From his sickbed Roger timidly asks Don, ‘Do you believe in energy… like a human energy… like a soul?’ Products of a world that demands stoic masculinity, they stumble through a conversation they are ill-equipped to handle. After watching Roger helplessly weeping in his wife’s arms, Don phones Betty. She expresses her deep condolences before complaining about her step-mother’s pot roast. With Roger’s deathlike countenance fresh in his mind, Don runs to Rachel. He tells her:

I remember the first time I was a pallbearer. I’d seen dead bodies before. I must have been fifteen. My aunt. I remember thinking, ‘They’re letting me carry the box, they’re letting me be this close to it, they’re not hiding anything from me now.’ And then I looked over and I saw all the old people waiting together by the grave and I remember thinking I just moved up a notch.

Don makes a pass at Rachel, but she rebuffs him and tells him to go home to his wife. However, he succeeds in seducing her under the guise of a tragic Don Juan: ‘This is it. This is all there is, and I feel like it’s slipping through my fingers like a handful of sand.’ They spend the night together before Don shares the truth about his past. The ensuing affair is short lived. When Don’s true identity as Dick Whitman is threatened with exposure, his response is to flee. He tells Rachel they should run away, ‘we’ll start over like Adam and Eve’. Rachel correctly intuits that he doesn’t want to run away with her, just run away. The callousness of
his proposal is a testament to just how little attachment Don has to his current life. For the first time, Rachel catches a glimpse of the moral and emotional void behind his handsome mask. Horrified that he would consider abandoning his children she responds, ‘what are you fifteen years old?’ The accusation links back to Don’s teenage memory of the funeral. The implication being that his Gatsbyesque flight from reality has left him emotionally stunted, selfish and immature. Rejecting his proposal, she brings their relationship to an end.

Adding a further complication to Don’s life is the return of a ghost from his past. After seeing a picture of Don in a newspaper, his estranged brother Adam Whitman attempts to rekindle their relationship. Adam, like his namesake, is an innocent, hopelessly lost in the world since the death of the remainder of his family. Cold heartedly, Don rejects his brotherly advances, maintaining he has too much to lose by acknowledging the past: ‘I have a life’ he tells Adam, ‘and it only goes one direction. Forward’. Yet, Adam’s arrival sparks a series of flashbacks that suggest Don remains in the grip of the past. Later in the season, while poring over a box of family photos, he is moved to call Adam. He learns that his younger brother hanged himself in his dingy hotel room. The loss of the one remaining connection to his original family is compounded by the growing sense of distance from his present one.

While preparing a campaign for Kodak’s new slide projector wheel, Don takes the first tentative steps towards a more mature connection with his past. Kodak had wanted the projector marketed as a technological innovation. However, Don explains to them that ‘technology is a glittering lure’ but sometimes a deeper ‘sentimental bond’ can be formed with a product. Echoing Rachel’s discussion of utopia, ‘he evokes the etymological roots of nostalgia in nostos (homecoming) and algos (pain, grief, distress)’ (Small, 2013: 182). In contrast to the Lucky Strike campaigns’ celebration of forgetfulness, season one closes with an acknowledgment of the power of memory. At the heart of the pitch is an idyllic portrait of family togetherness:

This device isn’t a spaceship, it’s a time machine. It goes backwards, and forwards. It takes us to a place where we ache to go again. It’s not called the wheel, it’s called the carousel. It lets us travel the way a child travels - around and around, and back home again, to a place where we know we are loved.

As Don talks, the carousel cycles through a series of images: Don and Betty sharing a hotdog on a date, Don carrying his bride across the threshold, a heavily pregnant Betty, Don asleep
with his children on the couch. The series ends with a New Year’s kiss between Don and Betty that links back to the couple at Sally’s birthday party. Individually, these moments had failed to captivate him as he drifted through his life. Now viewed in unison, they seem to suggest the possibility of a wider order. But Don’s wistful smile shows this idyllic vision is tinged with sadness and regret. Unlike a child, he knows there can be no utopic homecoming. Adam is dead and his own childhood was far from the idyllic portrait he evokes to sell his campaigns. Yet building on childhood fantasy, his maturing perspective acknowledges a necessary interplay between the sorrows and joys of life. Looking back on his past, he finds the spectre of mortality and loss heightens the emotional pitch of these moments. As he looks upon the earnest smiles of his wife and children, for the moment it seems like he already has everything necessary for his happiness. Caught up in his own pitch, he comes to suspect that his lack of genuine engagement has been the telling absence, that perhaps with a change in attitude he will be able to find life within these idyllic images.

The final episode of season one ends like the first, with Don heading to the suburbs on a train. Earlier, he had told Betty he was too busy to spend Thanksgiving with the family. Now, still in the afterglow of the Carousel pitch, he returns home in time to join his welcoming family for the holiday. The scene cuts back to him once again opening the front door. The first homecoming was only a fantasy. Betty and the children have already left for the weekend and Don’s calls of hello are met only with a gloomy silence. The camera pushes back to show him sitting alone on the stairs of his empty home while Bob Dylan’s haunting refrain to lost love ‘Don’t Think Twice It’s Alright’ plays in the background.

In season two, after long harbouring suspicions, Betty learns that Don is having an affair and asks him to leave. Don moves into a hotel before escaping unannounced to California. The journey is heavily symbolic: the West having a long mythic association with the freedom of the frontier and the idea of personal reinvention (Hernandez & Holmberg, 2011: 16). On the way West, Don’s suitcase is mislaid before being returned to his New York address. Free of his ‘baggage’, he seriously considers the possibility of starting anew. He falls in with a family of wealthy cosmopolitans who promise him a life of hedonistic pleasure. For a while he seems content to abandon the problems and responsibilities of his previous life. However, while embracing his new lover Joy, Don is distracted by the sight of a divorcé and his two children. The camera cuts to the point of view of the young boy, his sad eyes foreshadowing
the likely future for Don’s own children. Still yearning for the love of real family, he realises he wants more than Joy and her sybaritic ways.

Unsure of where to turn, he visits Anna, the widow of the ‘real’ Don Draper. A series of flashbacks establish that Anna tracked Don down after the war before forgiving him for stealing her husband’s identity. They subsequently divorced, but maintained a deep felt connection. With Anna, Don is freed from the need to protect his identity and can speak openly and candidly about his life. In these moments, the domineering persona of Don Draper gives way to the more open and vulnerable Dick Whitman. The warmth and ease of their relationship suggests a potential for meaningful attachment that will remain unrealised whilst Don hides behind his false identity. Miserable, he tells Anna, ‘I’ve ruined everything - my family, my wife, my kids’, before acknowledging his sense of responsibility for Adam’s suicide. Anna sits and listens to his sins.

Later, Anna gives him a Tarot reading in which he draws the resurrection card. She tells him ‘The only thing keeping you from being happy is the belief that you are alone’. More cynical he responds, ‘People don’t change’. After leaving Anna, he heads to the Californian shore. The camera follows a set of footprints disappearing into the ocean that initially suggest a suicidal yearning for release. The following shot cuts to Don ducking beneath the waves. George Jones gospel hymn ‘The Cup of Loneliness’ plays in the background, shifting the symbolism towards baptism. Absolved of his sins by Anna, Don appears to be a penitent on the road to becoming a better man.

Returning east, he tacitly confesses his indiscretions to Betty and pleads for another chance. Initially, Betty remains unmoved. However, after discovering she is pregnant with their third child, she allows Don to return home. Their reconciliation is doomed from the start. Despite earnest intentions, Don remains incapable of living a suburban life and soon returns to his old ways. Betty in turn, is only invested in the idea of family life. Throughout the years she has developed from being a neurotic housewife to textbook narcissist. At times she appears enamoured with the idea of being the perfect mother, but when her children innocently misbehave, she resents them for spoiling her picture-book image of family life. She remains

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20 The exemplar here is Christopher Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1978).
bitter and resentful, convinced that she is the only one that is playing by the rules. When she comes across independent women, she becomes jealous and blames her children for keeping her chained to the home. The one constant is her inability to feel strong emotions about anything beyond herself. At Thanksgiving, she is exposed as the antithesis of the warmth and humility at the heart of the 1950s ideal: ‘I’m thankful that I have everything I want’ she prays, ‘and that no one else has anything better’.

After a chance encounter, Betty allows herself to be courted by another man. At the end of season three, shortly after discovering the truth about Don’s identity, she files for divorce. Incapable of envisaging life as a single woman, she immediately remarries. Her second husband, Henry Francis, is an older, more mature man who offers her the affection and attention of which she has always felt deprived. However, soon after they marry, Betty realises that nothing much has changed. While less anxious, she suffers the same sense of emptiness and ennui as before. Her problem, the series explicitly suggests, lying not in her choice of husband but in the clash between her idyllic expectations and the reality of life as a dependent housewife.

Season four opens with Don living the life of a middle-aged bachelor. Now totally free from the restraints of marriage, he appears to be on a slow-burn path to self-destruction. While he manages to maintain appearances at work, his nights are filled with drinking binges, prostitutes and an endless stream of one-night stands. Increasingly his story echoes a long line of nihilistic depressives from Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Stavrogin to Albert Camus’s Mersault. Don is free of commitments and illusions, but finds that a lack of meaningful attachment leads to weak-willed indifference. He laments, ‘I have been watching my life. It’s right there. And I keep scratching at it, trying to get into it’ but ‘I don’t feel anything’. The truth is he lacks both the will and the desire to change. As his depression mounts, he seems incapable of drawing any pleasure from life. His work, once his greatest joy, is now tainted by a wider sense of despair. Even the sensual pleasures he used to voraciously pursue have lost their savour. His binges are now only temporary salves for a debilitating ennui.

For the first half of the season, Don is lost to alcoholism, self-loathing and despair. He is shocked awake mid-series by news of the terminal illness of Anna Draper. As usual, he takes his anxiety out on those closest to him, selfishly forcing Peggy to abandon her birthday celebrations and remain with him at the office. When not working they argue. Peggy accuses
him of failing to appreciate her, Don fires back that she is ungrateful. These cathartic barbs slowly give way to more open communication. Throughout the night they drink and share stories from their past. Don talks about growing up on a farm and Peggy of the traditional expectations placed on her by her Catholic family: ‘I know what I am supposed to want’ she declares, ‘but it just never feels right, or as important as anything in that office’. For Don and Peggy, work remains both their enduring passion and a welcome escape from the distressing aspects of their lives. Later, Peggy opens up about the experience of giving up her child. Don asks her whether she thinks ‘about it’ much. ‘I try not to’ she replies, ‘but it comes out of nowhere—playgrounds’. Brought closer together by the knowledge of each other’s damaged pasts, they fall asleep on the couch. The next morning Don makes the call that confirms Anna has died. Breaking down in tears he tells Peggy:

Don: Somebody very important to me died.

Peggy: Who?

Don: The only person in the world who really knew me.

Peggy: That's not true.

Throughout the years, Peggy has grown from being his secretary, to protégé and now his closest friend and confidant.

In *Mad Men*, almost everyone finds it impossible to speak honestly about the way they feel. For the most part they exist in extreme isolation, concealing secrets for which they are ashamed. Consequently, real communication is rare, requiring an openness, vulnerability and trust that they are usually too scared of exposure to afford. Through their punitive super-egos, social pretences, lingering resentments and insecurities, the series probes how social and personal barriers obstruct the way to genuine communication. When moments of honesty, trust and tenderness emerge, they are hard-won reprieves from the prison of the self. These moments are invariably short lived. Back at work that morning, Don clasps Peggy’s hand before they share a look that is at once a mixture of gratitude, love and pain. The moment passes and they withdraw into their accustomed roles. While they will rarely speak as honestly and openly again, they will remain comforted by the memory of the other, at least for a moment, reaching out across the silence.
Buoyed by Peggy’s support, Don commences a stereotypical program for change. He starts exercising, curbs his drinking and begins collecting his thoughts in a diary. In the midst of this renaissance, he starts a relationship with Dr. Faye Miller, a sophisticated and intelligent psychologist. Faye encourages him to deal with the issues from his past, but this would mean confronting unpalatable truths about his life. Ultimately, he rejects the therapeutically-inspired inward turn. Once more he heads west, taking his secretary Megan as an ersatz nanny, on a holiday with his children to Disneyland. After visiting Walt Disney’s futuristic utopia ‘Tomorrowland’ they spend the night together. By the end of the trip they are engaged. In contrast to Faye’s mature sophistication, Megan is young, optimistic, adoring and better with the children. For a desperate man committed to self-evasion, she is a *tabula rasa* with whom he can start over again. When he breaks the news to Faye she angrily responds: ‘I hope she knows you only like the beginnings of things’.

Faye’s analysis is insightful. Throughout the first six series, Don’s life has the pattern of a downward spiral. With each rotation, the attempts to bring meaning to his life are further drained of hope and enthusiasm. He has tried career, marriage, family and various hedonistic alternatives but his existential angst remains. The carousel pitch had transfigured the wheel, making it a magical object that could conquer time and rewrite the past. The reality is that behind the gloss his life is more like a wheel; a perpetual cycle of striving and dissatisfied attainment. Those that know Don come to realise this is the governing principle of his character. In season five, he has a fling with his now ex-wife Betty. Post-coitus she tells him: ‘I love the way you look at me when you’re like this. But then I watch it decay. I can only hold your attention so long’. After years of frustrating repetition, Don’s life suggests that happiness is not only elusive but inevitably short lived. In a moment of self-understanding, he reappraises his ‘Freedom from Fear’ pitch. ‘What is happiness’ he now declares, ‘It’s a moment before you need more happiness’.

**For Those Who Think Young**

Don’s decline is framed by wider social change. As the series progresses towards 1970, a generational cleft becomes palpable. In 1960, the younger members of Sterling Cooper still largely followed the cues of their elders. They committed themselves to a career, married
young, had children, and at least on the surface, bought into the moral earnestness of the suburbs. Coming to maturity in the late 1950s, they were separated from the counter-culture generation that followed by a desire to appear older than their years. They wanted what they saw above them and cultivated similar tastes and viewpoints to the preceding generation. By the early 1960s, however, there is a decisive shift towards the idealisation of youth.

Following the normative sociological account, Mad Men portrays the 1960s as an era where youth culture and traditional middle-class values clashed in a very public fashion. As the series approaches 1970, Don’s fedora hat and grey flannel suit increasingly appear stiff and out of place. The rapidity of external change is further heightened by his inner stasis. As hip and young become a premium, maturity draws closer on the continuum to obsolescence. The first episode of season two, ‘For those who think young’ fires a warning shot at Don’s generation. As the cultural revolutions of the 1960s gain momentum, they must either accept that the times are changing, or find themselves swimming against the tide of history.

These changes reverberate through the advertising world. In 1960, the employees of Sterling Cooper are perplexed by a series of new advertisements for Volkswagen. Discussing a black and white Volkswagen Beetle ad entitled ‘lemon’, Don declares, ‘I don’t know what I hate most about it’. At the same time, he senses a shift in the advertising Zeitgeist. The ‘lemon’ ad was the first in a series of self-effacing and irreverent campaigns produced by the advertising firm Doyle Dane Bernbach. These campaigns signalled a shift away from advertising that dealt in superlatives, promising products that were bigger, faster and newer. The Volkswagen ads enjoined the consumer to ‘think small’ and ‘live bellow your means’. As Thomas Frank has explored in The Conquest of Cool (1996), these campaigns capitalised on disenchantment for their success, poking fun at the empty promises of consumer culture whilst simultaneously commodifying discontent. In Mad Men, the lemon campaign is a further symptom of cultural divide. On the one hand, agencies like Sterling Cooper continue to peddle their tired homilies to middle-class values. On the other hand, agencies like Doyle Dane Bernbach parodied the ideals of the 1950s in order to establish ironic distance for their products. Together, these approaches would help to foster a climate of relativity and cynicism that undercut faith in the honesty of advertising and the wider credibility of middle-class narratives (Goldman, 2005: 145). In the process, they ensured that the world as advertised would never again be uncritically absorbed.
The consequences of this cultural cleft are further developed through the counter-culture movement. *Mad Men’s* portrait echoes Paul Goodman’s best seller and bible for alienated youth, *Growing Up Absurd* (1960). Goodman argued that in spite of its affluence, mid-century America suffered from a lack of faith in its social and political institutions and a consequent dearth of meaningful roles for children to aspire to. The Beats, he maintained, saw American life as a rat race, and found that neither working for a corporation nor the instalment-plan life in the suburbs held much appeal. Consequently, they railed against a life spent working meaningless jobs to feed the consumerist needs fostered by incessant advertising and peer group pressure. While sympathetic to the Beats’ protest, Goodman bemoaned the fact that they had failed to grow into ideological and political maturity. Echoing Goodman, in *Mad Men* the Beat ethos embodies a vague insistence on the importance of feeling over ideas, spontaneity over order and personal authenticity over inherited culture. The contours of this weakly-defined ethos are outlined in an exchange between Don and one of Midge’s friends:

Midge’s Friend: Look at you. Satisfied, dreaming up jingles for soap flakes and spot remover, telling yourself you're free.

Don: Oh my God. Stop talking and make something of yourself.

Midge’s Friend: Like you? You make the lie. You invent want. You're for them... not us.

Don: Well, I hate to break it to you, but there is no big lie. There is no system. The universe is indifferent.

Midge’s Friend: Aww man, why did you have to say that?

There are elements of truth on both sides. Don and his colleagues have already been exposed as cynical manipulators of public sentiment. Yet, despite these flaws, the Beats are unable to provide a viable alternative. The counter-culture, in *Mad Men’s* reading, has failed to evolve beyond youthful frustration. The Beat’s puerile ideology is matched only by the paucity of their culture. In one episode, Don is taken to an evening of political poetry that descends into the burlesque. There is no Bob Dylan in *Mad Men’s* Greenwich Village, only a parade of pompous hacks and exhibitionists. While Don and his cohorts are criticised for being philistines, in terms of artistic talent, they have won the day. The best of Beat culture, like
Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) celebrated the vitality of ‘the ones who are mad to live’ who ‘burn like fabulous roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars’ (1957: 11). In *Mad Men*, this language of freedom and jubilation is exposed as largely posture: a mask for a lack of strong commitments and desires.

The Hippie movement, as a later site of counter-cultural resistance, is similarly given short shrift. In the final series, Roger Sterling’s daughter abandons her husband and child to live on a rustic commune. One of the hippies tells Roger, ‘We do things by consensus here… everyone does what they want’. More worldly, Roger responds, ‘Oh, believe me, there is always a hierarchy’. Like the Beats, the hippies are portrayed as naïve. Their ideals are depicted as a utopic pipe dream that is realisable only through a rejection of the responsibilities of the adult world. By establishing a contrast between suburban ennui and the puerile romanticism of the counter-culture, *Mad Men* vitiates the possibility of both the middle-class narrative and its alternatives. Consequently, a tight-packed fatalism governs the lives of the main characters. While the traditional narrative of career, marriage and family may be failing, they are burdened by the realisation that there is little value in any of the alternatives. They are left to sort through the pieces in the hope of finding something that will bring meaning and purpose to their lives.

Often overlooked amidst the revolutions of the 1960s are the lives of the children. In the early seasons, Sally and Bobby—the Draper’s two young children—are often found in the care of their nanny or seated in front of the television. Neither obtrusive nor demanding, for the most part they are left to amuse themselves. In moments of domestic discord, they are innocent and uncomprehending witnesses to the actions of their parents. As Sally Draper matures, she develops similarities to Holden Caulfield, the disaffected hero of J. D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* (1951).21 Like Holden, her teenage years are marked by a dearth of parental interest and authority. Sally and Holden possess an emotional sincerity and purity of intention that contrasts with the adult world. Consequently, they share a bitter antipathy to everything in this world that they feel is ‘phony’. Through their eyes, the duplicity, self-deception and dominance of form over substance that mark adult life is made apparent. Their personal demand for authenticity and moral clarity exposes just how far their parents have fallen: how

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21 The influence of *The Catcher in the Rye* is most evident in the season five episode *Commissions and Fees*. Echoing Holden Caulfield story, Sally’s friend Glen sneaks away from his boarding school to meet her at the Museum of Natural History. Sally’s take on her mother ‘she is such a phony’ is Holden’s catechism.
their public face hides a warren of worn-down moral scruples and false legitimations that have developed over the years. Like Holden, Sally passes judgment on an adult world that is too self-absorbed and distracted to look upon itself.

Sally’s story is illustrative of how *Mad Men’s* toxic adult world presses upon the young, depriving them of their innocence and confidence in their role models from an early age. As Don acknowledges, ‘kids today they have no one to look up to because they’re looking up to us’. By failing to provide a world worth growing up for, the adults have defrauded the following generations. As a result, the adolescents are prematurely cynical, disaffected and deeply ambivalent about their future prospects. In presenting the process of maturation, *Father Knows Best* had followed in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*. Springfield was a world that was confident in its traditions, a place where children naturally blossomed into the time-honoured and ultimately self-evident truths of the adult world. In *Mad Men*, maturity is met with suspicion. Lacking legitimate figures of authority, the adolescents seem to embody Abbie Hoffman’s advice to not ‘trust anyone who is over the age of thirty’ (as cited in Chepesiuk, 1995: 182).

*Mad Men’s* portrayal of adolescence vitiates the possibility of growth and self-fulfilment. The children’s stories suggest that life is moulded from the cradle and that anxieties and insecurities crystallise long before self-awareness. These childhood wounds never heal. Instead, they linger below the surface, wreaking havoc on the characters’ fragile sense of self and seemingly forever barring the possibility of happiness. Consequently, *Mad Men* endorses only the most pessimistic tenets of psychoanalysis; acknowledging its insight into the formation of character but rejecting the ameliorative promise of therapy. The result is an almost systemic sadness that passes from one generation to the next.

**Modesty and Renewal**

At the end of season six, Don finally hits rock bottom. After repeatedly failing to make any meaningful changes in his life, he has become an incorrigible drunk and lecher. When he makes it to work, he engages in childish competition with fellow creative director Ted Chaough. Ostensibly, he is jostling for the role as alpha male. In reality, Ted’s good nature is an unflattering mirror to his selfishness and misery. As his bitterness and despondency
mount, all his decisions become erratic, often decided on a whim, out of spite, or simply for the pleasure of dominating others. Eventually, his destructive antics alienate everyone. Horrified by his behaviour, Peggy declares, ‘you’re a monster’. After finding Don in bed with his neighbour’s wife, Sally casts a similar judgment screaming, ‘you disgust me’. When an opportunity to start a satellite office in California presents itself, he seems once more set to run away from the problems in his life.

Whilst preparing to leave for California, Don delivers a pitch for Hershey’s. He begins with a Rockwellian tale of his youth. Hershey’s is so iconic that everyone has their own story to tell:

Mine was my father, taking me to the drugstore after I mowed the lawn and telling me I could have anything I wanted, anything at all — and there was a lot — but I picked a Hershey bar. The wrapper looked like what was inside, and as I ripped it open, my father tousled my hair, and forever, his love and the chocolate were tied together. That’s the story we’re going to tell. Hershey’s is the currency of affection. It’s the childhood symbol of love.

The Hershey’s executives smile at this alluring piece of Americana. ‘Well weren’t you a lucky little boy’ one declares before the rest break into good-natured laughter. As the account men deftly shift the conversation to marketing strategies, Don looks down at his hands that are shaking from the ravages of alcoholism. They are a final testament to the toxicity of his life. No longer able to live the lie, he interrupts the conversation with an unscripted second pitch. He was an orphan raised in a brothel. A prostitute who cared for him had made him rifle through her clients’ pockets. When he stole enough money she would buy him a Hershey bar. With a mixture of vulnerability and self-loathing he tells his audience, ‘I would eat it alone in my room, with great ceremony, feeling like a normal kid… it was the only sweet thing in my life’.

By eviscerating the myth of Don Draper, he appears to have finally confronted the ghosts of his past. However, his personal honesty is not well received. The other partners of the agency are appalled by the inappropriate timing of his confession and place him on forced leave. Megan is similarly devastated by the change in plans. She had invested everything in the idea of starting again in California and leaves New York on her own. The season ends with Don, taking his children to see the brothel that was once his home. ‘This is where I grew up’ he
tells them. Sally stares at the dilapidated building before turning to her father, her accustomed look of disgust now softened by a hint of understanding.

Season seven begins in 1969. Following the bloody and tumultuous years of the late 1960s there is a widespread sense of moral and political exhaustion. The first episode of the final series is framed by President Nixon’s inauguration speech:

We have found ourselves rich in goods, but ragged in spirit; reaching with magnificent precision for the moon, but falling into raucous discord on earth. We are caught in war, wanting peace. We are torn by division, wanting unity. We see around us empty lives, wanting fulfilment. We see tasks that need doing, waiting for hands to do them. To a crisis of the spirit, we need an answer of the spirit. To find that answer, we need only look within ourselves. When we listen to ‘the better angels of our nature,’ we find that they celebrate the simple things, the basic things—such as goodness, decency, love, kindness. Greatness comes in simple trappings.

By the final season, the gloss has faded from everyone’s lives. After years of seeking pleasure outside the family home, Pete now has an ex-wife who doesn’t need him and a young daughter who barely knows him. Typical of Mad Men, he has suffered from conflicting desires. For years he resented his lack of freedom but now finds bachelor life as dissatisfying as marriage. Joan has a partnership, but not the one she dreamt of. A closeted homosexual friend offers to marry her yet she refuses, clinging to her belief in true love. At work, she remains burdened by her past. Regardless of her career achievements, she is seen as someone who slept her way to the top. After a string of failed romances, Peggy has the career she dreamt of but little else. She bonds with a neighbourhood child and sombrely reflects on what could have been. Betty remains embittered, her second marriage proving as empty as her first. With Megan seemingly content to start again in California, Don accepts the inevitability of a second divorce. All relationships have failed, leaving them to reflect on the mistakes of the past. Wounded by the decade, their lives have an air of bleak desolation.

Yet amidst the gloom, there are modest signs of hope and renewal. First, there is Don’s relationship with his daughter. Now fifteen, Sally remains deeply embittered by her dishonest and apathetic parents. Since finding Don with his neighbour’s wife, she is loath to spend time with him while Betty remains cold and uncaring. When Sally agrees to attend an exclusive boarding school, it is a relief for everyone involved. At school she spends her time with a clique of jaded young women. At times she appears to be a Betty in waiting, adopting her
mother’s affectations and manipulative approach to men. At other times, more like her father, she is bored by the shallow conventions of her milieu. At the start of season seven, Sally discovers her father has been lying about losing his job. She is disgusted but not surprised. Her anger comes to a head on a trip back to school. After Don interrogates her over a small lie, she shifts the conversation to her father’s continued dishonesty. Resentfully, Don accuses her of lying in wait ‘just like her mother’ before Sally declares he has no right to judge her. Earlier in the day she asked him to ‘just tell the truth’ now she begs ‘just stop talking’.

They stop for petrol and dinner at a roadhouse. Don tells Sally about the fallout from the Hershey meeting, ‘I told the truth about myself. But it wasn’t the right time, and so they made me take some time off… I was ashamed’. Sally asks him why he has not moved to California to be with Megan. He explains that he has stayed in New York to fix his mistakes though he is unsure of where to start. Moved by her father’s earnest attempt to make amends, her hostility begins to thaw. She talks about the unsettling experience of going to the funeral of her friend’s mother. Fatherly, Don bemoans the fact that he can’t protect her from the reality of death before offering the somewhat comforting truism that ‘life goes on’. Moving on to her own teenage confusions, she tells him, ‘I’m so many people’. With saddened eyes Don recognises the existential predilection that has plagued his own life. As an adolescent, Sally had held the world to moral absolutes, judging people as authentic or phony. Now with dawning maturity, she is beginning to realise that life is filled with shades of grey. Her reunion with her father has been made possible by her recognition of the difficulty of maintaining a coherent personality in the adult world. The mood lightens when Don tricks Sally, who is still young enough for moments of naivety, into thinking that he is going to run out on the bill. For a moment their troubles are forgotten in the simple pleasure of being father and child.

Later that night, Don drives Sally back to school. After saying their goodbyes, Sally gets out of the car before turning as if she has forgotten something: ‘I love you’ she says before closing the door. Don is left awestruck as the Zombie’s bittersweet ode to the restorative power of love ‘This Will Be Our Year’ accompanies the fadeout to the credits:

The warmth of your love
is like the warmth of the sun
and this will be our year
took a long time to come.

Don't let go of my hand
now the darkness has gone
and this will be our year
took a long time to come.

Throughout the final series, Don and Sally help bring a sense of order to each other’s lives. With a new-found sense of responsibility, Don becomes a more positive father figure. Now more involved in Sally’s life, his personal problems lose some of their urgency. Fatherhood seems to allow him to move beyond individual frustrations and understand himself as part of a wider order. A central theme of the final series is the relationship between generations. The show increasingly suggests that individual legacies will lie less in public successes than in the attitudes, hopes and dreams passed on to those who follow. For years, Sally had craved parental attention, stability and legitimate authority. Regularly likened to her mother, there had always been a portent that she would end up cold, malicious and uncaring, a beautiful but empty shell. In the mid-series finale, Don’s last worlds to her are ‘don’t be so cynical’, advice that she takes to heart. That the man who once declared ‘love was invented… to sell nylons’ can tell his daughter this and she will listen, is a testament to their renewed confidence in each other and the world.

Don’s workplace reconciliation is more complicated. Whilst on forced leave, he is replaced by a new creative director. Lou Avery is the epitome of managerial mediocrity; more interested in meeting deadlines than producing quality work. His impassive approach is reflected across the wider economy in a cadre of fresh-faced MBAs that parrot the latest managerial terms. At the end of the series, their ascension is marked by the death of Burt Cooper. In the first series, Burt lauded Ayn Rand’s Atlas Shrugged (1957) as an exemplar of business practice. Inspired by aristocratic ideals like Nietzsche’s Übermensch and Joseph Schumpeter’s entrepreneur, Rand railed against the bureaucratic assault on the creative spirit. Atlas Shrugged depicted how the engineers and entrepreneurs who had built America were being succeeded by small-minded and overly-cautious managers. Echoing Rand, Mad Men’s corporate America is in the process of losing the verve and imagination that had once made it great. Don is allowed to return to work mid-series, but in a greatly diminished role. In his absence, Sterling Cooper has evolved into a modern company and his brilliant but maverick
ways are now held to be counterproductive. Under new management, the company is now largely run on marketing models generated by a computer that has been installed in what used to be the creative lounge. With heavy-handed symbolism, the series portends a dwindling role for creative individuals in the coming age of managers and technocrats.

Despite this sense of foreboding, Don and Peggy are reconciled through their work. Burger Chef, a rapidly expanding fast food chain, is in the market for a new campaign. The strategy of how to appeal to Middle America needs to be set. Lou Avery wants a story for American mothers, something that allows them to feel comfortable serving fast food on the time-honoured American table. Preparing for the campaign, Peggy travels the country conducting surveys in Burger Chef parking lots. She encounters harried mothers fetching dinner before rushing to beat their husbands home. The initial strategy is a Rockwellian homily to domesticity. Lou Avery smiles and remarks, ‘It’s nice to see family happiness again’ and prepares to sign off on the campaign. However, Don and Peggy remain unconvinced, their personal demand for creative perfection leaving them with a gnawing sense that something is not quite right.

Typical of the best of Mad Men’s campaigns, the solution comes in the middle of the night, as Don and Peggy seek catharsis in the American Dream. Initially, they retread old ground, brainstorming a series of Rockwellian scenarios, all of which feel cloying. Exasperated Peggy asks, ‘Does this family exist anymore? Are there people who eat dinner and smile at each other instead of watching TV?’ She asks Don if he shared moments like this with his family. ‘I don’t remember’, he dispiritedly replies. Throughout the night, Peggy tries to pull away from the traditional ideal while Don remains more steadfast. Once more discussion turns to the frustrations of their lives. Peggy laments that she is now thirty, unmarried, and like Nick Carraway, facing a ‘decade of loneliness’ (Fitzgerald, 1990: 129). Don, now estranged from his second wife, seems resigned to bachelorhood. Eventually, he is forced to acknowledge that the domestic myth is no longer serviceable, having become too distant to speak to their lives. In a moment of inspiration, Peggy captures the new strategy: ‘What if there was a place where you could go where there was no TV, and you could break bread, and whoever you were sitting with was family?’ It is her Carousel moment. In 1960, Don found solace in nostalgia for the domestic ideal. Now at the end of the decade, this romantic image of family life seems anachronistic, but the need for love and security that it embodied remains.
The episode ends with Peggy and Don explaining the new campaign to Pete. Sitting at a table in a Burger Chef restaurant she tells him, ‘It’s about family, every table here is the family table’. The traditional notion of family is something that each of them has struggled to achieve. By season seven, they have all failed; Don and Pete are preparing for divorce, while Peggy has given up her child and had a string of failed romances. Indeed, the only adult relationships that they have successfully maintained have been at the office. Now, having lowered their gaze from the ideal, they have found sustaining qualities in one another. Their ‘new family’ is a bittersweet connection, built on honesty, need and pain. The camera pans out to show their table framed by the architectural lines of the restaurant’s interior: a bright red rectangle supported by a column on either side. It is the essential foundations of a home. As the camera pans out further, other tables come into view seating various forms of the ‘new family’, each managing to find time amidst the clamour of modern life to share little moments together as something more than the sum of their individual lives.

On the surface, the conclusion of *Mad Men* runs against the grain of the series. A final montage leaves several of the characters with uplifting endings. Peggy begins a workplace romance, Joan once again rejects a marriage proposal and sets out on a new career and Pete tries to rebuild his marriage in ‘beautiful and wholesome’ Wichita. However, as a series of ‘new beginnings’ rather than resolutions, these stories are left deliberately and ambiguously open-ended. Throughout its seven series, the narrative arcs in *Mad Men* have always been more circular than linear, casting doubt on the characters’ ability to make lasting and meaningful changes in their lives. Whilst there have been signs of modest growth, as the characters come to better understand their personal strengths and weaknesses, the overreaching atmosphere of the series is too existentially bleak to suggest stable touch downs in the happily ever after.

The conclusion of Don’s story further emphasises this sense of cyclical repetition. In the final episodes, Don once again flees his New York life for a Kerouacian road trip across America. After visiting Stephanie, the niece of Anna Draper, he is persuaded to accompany her to the Esalen Institute in California, a place that Tom Wolfe would deride as epitomising how the counter-culture’s yearning for transcendence devolved into narcissistic self-absorption and the demand for immediate gratification. ‘Esalen’s speciality’, Wolfe writes, ‘was lube jobs for the personality’ (1976: 145). In *Mad Men*, Esalen embodies the Gatsbyesque hope of self-transformation that has recurred throughout the series. While deeply cynical of workshops
with names like ‘Psychotechnics’ and ‘Divorce: a creative experience’, Don begrudgingly attends several sessions. In one, Stephanie is criticised for abandoning her young child. In a key scene following the session, Don tries to console her: ‘I know how people work. You can put all of this behind you. It will get easier as you move forward’. It is an almost verbatim restatement of the advice he gave Peggy in season two. Stephanie, seemingly functioning as a mouthpiece for the accumulated wisdom of the series, responds, ‘I don’t think you are right about that’.

The closing scene further amplifies this message. Don attends a dawn meditation session on a hilltop overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Symbolically, the scene revisits the association of the West with rebirth and renewal that has recurred throughout the series. Seated in the lotus position, Don’s meditation is guided by the platitudes of the resident guru: ‘The new day brings new hope… new ideas, a new you’. An enlightenment bell chimes as a wry smile begins to spread across his face. The scene cuts to Coca-Colas’ iconic ‘Hilltop’ commercial from 1971. A smiling group of multicultural youths dressed in hippie clothes sing in chorus:

I’d like to teach the world to sing
In perfect harmony
I’d like to buy the world a coke
And keep it company.

As the credits roll, the song reaches its sugary crescendo: ‘It’s the real thing (Coke is), what the world wants today (Coca-Cola), is the real thing’.

By utilising his experiences at Esalen to sell cola, Don’s story has come full circle. Several times throughout the 1960s, he seemed to be on the threshold of real change only to revert back to his old ways. Running against the Esalen ideal of the ‘new you’, Mad Men ultimately suggests that Don’s path to contentment lies in the recognition of what he really is—a gifted advertising executive. Consequently, the conclusion of the series suggests that Don will find no permanent solution to the existential angst that has plagued his life. Instead, he will continue on like he did before, finding periodic moments of happiness in work and family that offset his abiding sense of gloom. For a series steeped in the idea that happiness ‘is the moment before you need more happiness’ and a deep scepticism about individual’s capacity to effect lasting and meaningful change, this seems to be about as good as life can get.
Shortly after completing *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald declared that ‘America is the story of the moon that never rose’ (as cited in Tanner, 1990: xlix). For Fitzgerald, the romantic promise of America, exemplified in Gatsby, was the sense that life was pregnant with the possibility of ultimate fulfilment. The tragedy is that reality continually falls short of expectations. While Don is the Gatsbyesque exemplar of the series, all of the characters in *Mad Men* have laboured under the yoke of exalted and unrealisable dreams. Having fallen short of their hearts’ desires, they are prone to succumb to cynicism and despair. However, the final series suggests that this sense of disenchantment is perhaps a necessary intermediary phase that prepares them to find a modicum of comfort in their everyday lives. In emphasising qualities of honesty, empathy, humility and generosity, *Mad Men* ultimately suggests that happiness doesn’t lie in unrealisable ideals: the dream job, the perfect home or a Hollywood romance. Instead, it emerges periodically, in little moments: satisfaction in a job well done, watching a protegé succeed, moments between parent and child and the camaraderie between friends. In the process, *Mad Men* comes to rest on the same values that are found in Rockwell, yet its moments of grace are too tinged in sorrow and regret to possess the ready-made warmth and security of Rockwell’s portraits of American life.

The difficulty in achieving these moments further darkens the picture. In charting the movement of its characters towards honesty and intimacy, *Mad Men* utilises the aesthetic conventions of melodrama. The exemplary American melodramas, like the films of Douglas Sirk, focus upon individuals trapped within their social and psychological circumstances. The typical heroine is a suburban housewife, straightjacketed by traditional gender roles. Melodrama here functions as the emotional grammar of the bourgeois psyche that has come to be experienced as a prison. In *Mad Men*, this sense of social fatalism is extended to include the male characters as well. When the melodramatic mode occurs in the show, it is a geyser of emotional protest that erupts against social and psychological constraint. The movement towards true expression is always a struggle against self-deception, inner resistance and social convention as the characters try to bring their true needs up from the depths of their being. The emotional and psychological strain of these ‘moments’ make them inevitably short lived, with the characters typically withdrawing into their accustomed roles.

Adding further complication, the metaphysical atmosphere of *Mad Men* is much darker than the standard melodrama, where genuine communication leads towards catharsis. *Mad Men* is
haunted by the annihilatory prospect of death and the consequent sense that life is meaningless. The spectre of death is sometimes apprehended directly, in awkward conversations at funerals or in a morbid fascination with suicide. More often, its presence is apprehended obliquely. It is carried in moments of silence, in a haunted look or a pained smile. These gestures are mute because they occur in a world that lacks a vocabulary through which to convey their meaning. These moments suggest an enduring and inarticulable absence that can never be fully redressed. Outside of melodramatic moments, these concerns are usually only articulated on the psychiatrist’s couch. The failure of the ‘talking cure’—itself a form of melodrama—is a further illustration of the limitations on what can also be achieved through the triumph over repression. In therapy, big questions like ‘what is it all about?’ are continually met with silence. Frustrated by a lack of answers, Roger Sterling’s complaints could have been uttered by any of the characters on the show:

Life is supposed to be a path, and you go along and these things happen to you, and they’re supposed to change you, change your direction. But it turns out that’s not true. It turns out the experiences are nothing, they’re just some pennies you pick up off the floor, stick in your pocket, and you’re just going in a straight line to where you know where.

If this was all that Mad Men had to say it would be unremittingly bleak. Starting with Don’s nihilistic musing in the pilot episode, there are repeated allusions to Nietzsche and mid-twentieth century existentialists like Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Rationally, the world is held to be a meaningless parade of disjointed experiences that terminate in the ultimate absurdity of death. Despite the intelligence of the leading characters, they are unable to provide any intellectual counterpoint. Yet the series probes the experiential refractions of these ideas. The literature that occupies this terrain is typically filled with intellectual ‘mad men’ like Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Alexei Kirillov and Ivan Karamazov. Accepting that God is dead, they follow the logic of nihilism to its terrifying conclusion. In contrast, the ‘mad men’ of Madison Avenue suggest that while the philosopher and haunted novelist may live out these thoughts to a fevered pitch, for most people they cohabit with other aspects of their lives. While they face moments of acute existential despair, they take place in a world that is filled with a host of responsibilities, distractions, and even little moments of redemption.

Ultimately, the world of Mad Men draws upon both Rockwell and Nietzsche, occupying a space between a series of irreducible antinomies: innocence and cynicism, sentiment and
intellect, hope and despair. These antinomies frame life, but neither side can lay claim to its essence. Instead, the world is repeatedly shown to overflow the categories that seek to contain it. Inhabiting this world, the characters’ lives oscillate between its extremes. Consequently, there is a fluidity to their experiences that allows them to recoil from life’s meaningless brutality in one moment only to be captivated by wonder in the next. More often, everyday life rests somewhere in between. Taken as a whole, *Mad Men* seems to suggest that contentment is born from being able to maintain these tensions throughout the course of life. Its final message is a kind of agnostic openness to uncertainty. As Don comes to realise, ‘that’s what the job is… living in the not knowing’.
6- Conclusion

Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.


This thesis began with Weber’s assertion that the modern West is suffering from a crisis of meaning. The preceding chapters have added further sociological voices to this line of argument. In the main they have sung in key. The sociologists have charted a series of pathologies: the decline of the Protestant Ethic, the erosion of the authority of the family and the sense that with the collapse of higher legitimations modern individuals are left with little more than the shallow pleasures of consumerism. Implicit in all of these narratives is a shared concern with Weber’s question ‘what shall we do and how shall we make sense of our lives?’ I will begin this conclusion by reviewing the central themes that emerged in the preceding chapters in light of this question. In the process other questions emerge. What do these stories have to say in relation to this thesis of cultural decline? Do they suggest that modern life has become flat and disenchanted? Or alternatively, do they locate signs of enduring cultural vitality?

Taken as a whole, the four preceding chapters provide a mixture of qualification and support to the Weberian narrative. Debt and Credit was written in a period that many sociologists—including Weber, Riesman, Whyte and Bell—have identified as a heroic age of the Protestant Ethic. Freytag captures the self-understanding of the middle class as it assumes a dominant place in German social life. At its core, the novel is an extended celebration of the classic bourgeois values: honesty, hard work, thrift and a reverence for family and home, as the foundation of modern civilisation. Throughout the novel, bourgeois society is depicted as the most natural, humane and self-sufficient of all possible social systems. As chronicler and celebrant for this way of life, Freytag announces that there has never been a more affluent and fulfilling period in all of history.
However, despite its ostensible confidence, *Debit and Credit* is permeated with subtextual tensions. By grounding his middle-class ideal in a venerable merchant house, Freytag avoids having to address the industrial developments that were already noticeably transforming the mid-nineteenth century German landscape. Instead, the entire narrative is structured to suggest that bourgeois society is the teleological culmination of a long historic process. The values that underlie this society are held to be so self-evident and immutable that conflict within this world can only emerge through exogenous forces. Whether it is the aristocratic attempt to maintain outmoded privilege, the capricious nature of American capitalism or Jewish greed, these forces are repeatedly shown to have no bearing on the enduring legitimacy of bourgeois society. At this point, the formal realism of the novel is undermined by its ideological commitment. *Debit and Credit* ultimately proves to be less interested in documenting contemporary social anxieties than in galvanising faith in a way of life that was already beginning to disappear. As such, the novel appears to have spoken to both the aspirations of the emergent middle class and its deeply felt need to anchor this way of life in an established tradition.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, *Buddenbrooks* depicts bourgeois culture in a state of terminal decline. Mann captures a sense shared by many in his generation that the bourgeois way of life had been the last viable cultural form for Western civilisation. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Freytag had been able to depict a harmonious social order founded on binding universal laws. By the turn of the twentieth century, irony and scepticism have become essential elements of artistic production. Mann depicts a world that has lost its vital centre and has frayed into a host of competing perspectives. He captures bourgeois self-reflexivity in a period when it has lost its inner confidence and at-homeness in the world, and has begun to question the core tenets of its way of life.

Central to Mann’s vision is the collapse of the foundations of bourgeois culture. Where in Freytag the economy was the moral and ameliorative engine of civilisation, in Mann it is now seen to have a dehumanising effect. Spanning four generations, *Buddenbrooks* traces how the association of work with honesty, integrity and social duty, devolves from being a deeply felt inner conviction to a necessary pretence for commercial activity. Thomas Buddenbrook’s decline begins with the realisation that his austere moral code has been a mask for baser motivations of greed and pride. Ultimately, the bourgeois way of life is held to be doomed because it no longer recognises any higher value than the acquisition and preservation of
capital. Beginning in the economy, this love of money spreads outwards to permeate the most intimate aspects of private life. Ultimately, Mann suggests that when the commercial spirit entered the family home, the bourgeoisie lost the last redemptive aspect of its way of life.

The overarching trajectory of *Buddenbrooks* supports the Death of God thesis. Mann’s bourgeoisie establish fortunes, build mansions and pursue honorary positions within their community. Yet, despite their material success, they are unable to answer the most important question, ‘what comes next?’ With each generation, the waning tide of religious faith makes the Buddenbrooks’ ethos more problematic. The novel charts a growing cleft between the human need for religious, moral and aesthetic nourishment and the sterility of the late bourgeois world. In agreement with Weber, Mann sees late bourgeois society as a soulless and intractable reality. Yet, *Buddenbrooks* is not entirely pessimistic. Filled with the *fin de siècle* sense of cultural crisis, Mann beseeches his audience to adopt a posture of stoic heroism. While the world may be devoid of transcendent meaning, he insists that it is still possible to find a sense of dignity and moral integrity in the maintenance of inherited form.

At the heart of *Father Knows Best* is a rearticulation of the bourgeois domestic ideal: the male breadwinner and his stay-at-home wife, raising their children in the comfort and privacy of the suburban home. The governing value for this way of life is togetherness; the belief that ultimate meaning and purpose reside within the intimacy of family life. Ultimately, everything is subordinated to this value. While work remains an indispensable social good and source of income and identity, it should not impede the rhythms of family life. Indeed, the entire social order is shown to emanate from the solid respectability of the middle-class home. While there is confidence that standards of living will continue to improve, the overarching outlook remains conservative. The storylines repeatedly insist that the modern world has only changed cosmetically. Behind the new car, home and modern consumer goods lies an enduring foundation of traditional values.

Echoing *Buddenbrooks*, *Mad Men* is permeated with a sense of decay. Over the course of seven seasons, the series details the breakdown of the 1950s middle-class ideal. Home and family—the sacred sites of *Father Knows Best*—are shown to have become little more than grist for the advertising mills. As it traces the progression of the 1960s, *Mad Men* echoes central themes of mid-twentieth century sociological thought: the sense of moral disorientation that accompanied the rise of the counter-culture, anxiety over shifting gender
roles and the empty promises of consumer culture. In the process, *Mad Men* examines the experiences of a group of people as they struggle to bring a sense of order and significance to their lives.

The German and American case studies are both marked by a transition from a confident articulation of the world to a more ironic and circumspect portrait. On the surface, *Debit and Credit* and *Father Knows Best* are explicitly didactic. Each depicts a benevolent social order that is founded upon the values that they celebrate. As discussed in the preceding chapters, the absolute integrity of these worlds is ultimately only maintained through plot contrivance. Behind their ostensible realism, *Debit and Credit* and *Father Knows Best* avoid confronting problems that are not amenable to solution from within their narrow ideological perspectives. These problems continue to exist on a subtextual level where they serve as a counterbalance to the unabashed optimism of the surface narrative. In the retrospective portraits, these tensions become the overt subject matter. As a result, *Buddenbrooks* and *Mad Men* open up space for a more focused and deliberate engagement with the themes that run through each of the periods.

When these stories are read along-side one another, they are united by two central themes: work and family. Freytag introduces the theme of work in its classic bourgeois form. The work ethic is held to be both an expression of moral character and a social duty that contributes to the wider progress of civilisation. Work is also held to be the essential precursor through which financial security and family—the other important dimensions of life—are made possible. In *Father Knows Best*, this ideal is reformulated to accord with post-industrial social realities. While the pursuit of a vocation remains intimately associated with personal identity and social betterment, there is now an emphasis on finding a balance between work and family life. Contemporary sociologists were quick to seize upon this development and herald the collapse of the Protestant ethic and the emergence of an ambitionless and leisure-orientated consumer lifestyle. Running against these claims, *Father Knows Best* suggests a more moderate and self-conscious transition was taking place. While the ‘age of affluence’ had called into question the more ascetic elements of the old ethos, the series suggests that Americans remained deeply attached to traditional notions of the value of work.
The retrospective portraits are far more pessimistic. *Buddenbrooks* and *Mad Men* grapple with the consequences of declining faith in the relationship between the work ethic, moral virtue and wider social progress. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Mann suggested that with the collapse of its religious foundations, the work ethic was stripped of its inner content leaving only an empty shell. In later works, including *Tonio Kröger* (1903), *Death in Venice* (1912) and *The Magic Mountain* (1924), he repeatedly returned to the fading light of vocation, trying to salvage something vital from the wreckage with which to combat his generation’s sense of disorientation and despair. Whilst Mann believed that wider legitimations had dissolved, he insisted that the steely maintenance of values of discipline, composure, industry and self-restraint could still galvanise individual purpose and ward off the spectre of nihilism. Beyond this, Mann’s metaphysical pessimism precluded any greater affirmation. Shorn of its social and religious content, the work ethic is only legitimated at the level of personal integrity, in the refusal to surrender to despair and in a sober commitment to meet ‘the demands of the day’ (Weber, 1946: 156).

While *Mad Men* echoes *Buddenbrooks* in its depiction of collapsing legitimations for the work ethic, it provides a fruitful counterbalance to Mann’s pessimism. The series begins with an interrogation of the glamour and sophistication of mid-century American corporate life. Like Thomas Buddenbrook, the members of Sterling Cooper reach great professional heights and partake in all of the material trappings of success only to remain troublingly dissatisfied. More substantial legitimations are similarly extinguished. Throughout the series, repeated corporate annexations, the rising influence of a dispassionate managerial class and the ephemeral nature of advertising campaigns undermine the possibility of leaving a lasting legacy. Despite these qualifications, the series ultimately comes to suggest that the bourgeois vocational ideal continues to endure in a more modest form. While Don and Peggy are aware of the limited external significance of their work, that work remains an essential site of personal affirmation. On the everyday level, work in *Mad Men* is depicted as having the capacity to captivate individuals and provide a sense of structure and order to their lives. Beyond this, at times, the single-minded devotion to vocation can lead to the production of a perfect piece of work. *Mad Men* ultimately suggests that these are grace-like moments of harmony between self and world that puncture the customary rhythms of everyday life.

Running in tandem with the depiction of work, the idea of family and home is central to all four stories. Once again, Freytag establishes the bourgeois ideal: it is built around strict
demarcations of gender roles between the male breadwinner and the female homemaker. In *Debt and Credit*, the bourgeois home is depicted as a stable and untroubled site of intimacy and emotional refuge. Fifty years later, Mann unmasked the rising levels of greed and selfishness that lurked behind the thin veil of bourgeois propriety. Shorn of its affective content, the late bourgeois home is depicted as little more than a showcase for wealth and status. *Debit and Credit* ended with Anton’s Wolfhart’s marriage to the sister of his employer; a symbol of the harmonious relationship between work and home. In contrast, *Buddenbrooks* ends with a series of financial scandals that are followed by divorce. Subtitled ‘The Decline of a Family’, the novel explicitly decries the private deprivations that accompanied the development of bourgeois society.

While *Father Knows Best* unabashedly celebrates the domestic ideal, it is riddled with subtextual anxieties that would become the overt subject matter of 1960s discontent. Behind its confident exterior, the ideal of family togetherness is shown to be only achievable through a series of compromises. For men, greater participation in the domestic sphere requires a tapering of the traditional masculine values of hard work, competition and workplace success. As Jim’s story illustrates, this shift was accompanied by an anxious sense that the comforts of consumer society were having a feminising effect on the American male. For women, the ideal of the domestic angel is resolutely maintained through the rejection of meaningful alternatives. By diminishing the value of activities outside the home, the series placed an enormous burden on family life to provide a sense of purpose and fulfilment. While the 1950s witnessed the zenith of the American celebration of the nuclear family, the plot contrivances that are required to maintain the integrity of this ideal, suggest doubts were already beginning to emerge over whether there was enough within the domestic ambit to sustain a meaningful life.

If *Father Knows Best* galvanises the nuclear family, *Mad Men* deals explicitly with its decay. Through the contrast of the Rockwellian ideal and the characters private despair, the show examines what substantive content is left behind when the bright images begin to fade. Where traditional family remains present, it is as an aspirational ideal, and source of constant disillusionment and embitterment in the character’s lives. The men are bored and restless in their suburban homes and find they only feel alive whilst at work. The women are similarly dispirited. Raised on romantic images of the happy homemaker, the housewives find the reality unfulfilling. The family ideal is similarly a source of disconsolation for the career
women. The idea that women can only find happiness in the home poisons their workplace success, leaving them to wonder if the path they have chosen can lead towards genuine fulfilment. Yet contrary to Buddenbrooks, the disconnection is not final. As the show develops each character manages to find small moments of family-like contentment in non-traditional ways. There is a progressive pulling away from the white-picket-fence ideal towards the modest consolation found in ‘Burger Chef’ moments of genuine intimacy. While these moments fall short of the traditional ideal, they are shown to be more honest and attainable.

Through their portrayal of work and family, all of these stories engage in a conversation over what constitutes the good life. Debt and Credit and Father Knows Best are emblematic of an arriviste mentality. Each celebrates the attainment of middle-class ideals of career, financial security, homeownership and the simple pleasures of domesticity. Beyond this, these stories come to rest upon the bourgeois humanist assumption that continued social and economic progress will be accompanied by ever increasing levels of human happiness. As a result, any higher order of questioning is ultimately subsumed under the mantra ‘we’ve never had it so good’. With the benefit of hindsight, Buddenbrooks and Mad Men chart a widening gulf between these ideals and the reality of lived experience. Finding no lasting satisfaction in their culture’s governing narratives, the characters in each of these works come to despondently ask: ‘Is that all there is?’

The general trajectory in each of the case studies was captured in the 1950s by the American poet Delmore Schwartz:

> One can hardly help but be terrified when riches and success bring greater conflict and unhappiness, instead of gratification and peace. To have hopes which may be disappointed is a possibility which one naturally envisages and for which one has braced oneself. But to find the overwhelming fulfilment of hope and desire leaves one in disillusion or despair is one of the most demoralising of experiences.

(Schwartz, 1951: 12)

Echoing these sentiments, Buddenbrooks and Mad Men chart a growing disenchantment with the promises of Western modernity. Each of these stories ultimately comes to suggest that despite its unprecedented economic, social and political achievements, the modern West remains haunted by the prospect of existential despair. At the turn of the twentieth century,

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1 The line is from Peggy Lee’s 1969 hit ‘Is that all there is?’ which is a recurrent backing track in Mad Men’s final series. The song was inspired by Thomas Mann’s short story ‘Disillusionment’ (1896).
Mann provided the most pessimistic diagnosis. Following Nietzsche, he argued that the loss of an overarching metaphysical framework leads inevitably to the nihilistic conclusion that life is meaningless. Despite the breadth of his vision, Mann’s analysis remained within the Christian binary of faith or despair. The resilience of the voices that follow, however, suggests that Mann—like many of his generation—was writing too close to the ‘tremendous event’ of the Death of God (Nietzsche, 1974: 182). While the questions of meaning with which Buddenbrooks wrestled remain just as salient today, the apocalyptic tenor of Mann’s thought seems to have been shaped by the sense of broken idealism and civilisational crisis that emerged with specific intensity in fin de siècle Europe.

In depicting the American experience, Mad Men occupies similar metaphysical territory but finds a more buoyant resolution. Resisting the definitive either/or pronouncements of Buddenbrooks, the series opens a space for a more moderate appraisal of inherited values and a recognition of what remains vital within them. While Mad Men eschews grand notions of redemption, the existential problems charted by Mann are shown to have lost some of their urgency. Beyond the collapse of an overarching religious cosmology, traditional narratives of work and family have lost much of their coherence and force, but they remain integral in the search for an ordering principle for life. Mad Men celebrates the redemptive quality of little moments: the satisfaction in a job well done, watching a protégé succeed, the bond between parent and child and the camaraderie between friends. The series is a testament to people’s capacity to wrestle through their hardscrabble existence and find a sense of order and meaning in these aspects of their lives.

In part, the movement towards finding contentment in these moments is hindered by the sense that life should provide greater sources of affirmation. Whether it is the aristocratic pursuit of well-rounded personality or the freedom of bohemian life, all of the stories examined engage with romantic counter-narratives. Read against these promises of passionate and unfettered existence, the middle-class values that are presented have the potential to be seen as stale and limited. While these counter-narratives are repeatedly dismissed as irresponsible and unfulfilling, the frequency with which they recur suggests that the romantic yearning contained within them endures. As a result, each of these stories points towards an ongoing anxiety over the sober parameters of middle-class life. They suggest that behind the celebration of the everyday lies a dim awareness of the possibility that life is not being lived to its full intensity, that like T. S. Eliot’s Prufrock, the characters in these stories
may awaken one day to the horrible realisation that they have measured out their lives in coffee spoons (Eliot, 1954: 4).

This anxiety was more forcefully expressed by the American sociologists. In the middle of the twentieth century, David Riesman, William Whyte and C. Wright Mills followed Weber in contrasting a heroic bourgeois past with a mediocre present. As a result, these social critics share in a narrative that charts the inexorable cooling of the moral and religious energy that shaped the lifeways of the middle class. While each of these critics insisted that the characterological changes they documented existed on a continuum and were the product of long ranging historical processes, the ideal-type comparisons they employed made the contemporary cultural changes they observed appear excessively disjunctive. Whether it was Riesman’s assertion of a shift from inner-directed to other-directed character types, Whyte’s contrast between the rugged Protestant Ethic and the contemporary Social Ethic or C. Wright Mills lamentation that the old entrepreneurial ethos had been succeeded by the limited aspirations of the corporate ‘little man’, by methodological design, these studies were more attuned to finding symptoms of decadence than any positive aspects of cultural change (Mills, 1951: 264).

A further problem with the American sociological accounts is their overly pessimistic appraisal of the macro-level changes to post-war American society. Charting the relationship between the rise of large-scale and impersonal bureaucracies, the pervasive influence of mass culture and the consumption patterns of suburbia, they depicted the individual as beset on all sides by forces of conformity. The comforts and conveniences of modern life were held to mask disturbing losses to personal initiative and autonomy. Growing levels of affluence in this reading were seen to be ‘the malaise of the privileged’ (Riesman, 1965: lxii). On this level, their criticism was a mild rearticulation of Nietzsche’s last man. Convinced that contemporary attitudes and tastes had been shaped by the overarching institutional structure and foisted upon a dependent and malleable public, they were naturally averse to finding meaning and purpose in the routines of everyday life.

Their vision of society also affected the way they engaged with cultural texts. Believing that trends in popular culture directly reflected the changes in the institutional structure they described, the American sociologists tended to use cultural artefacts as post-factum support for the social patterns that they had already detected. As a result, they tended to be arbitrary
in their choice of texts. Whyte drew heavily upon Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (1956) to illustrate how values of competition and independence had been succeeded by a growing esteem for comfort and security. Similarly, Riesman utilised stories and advertisements in *Ladies’ Home Journal* to illustrate how other-directed individuals took their lifestyle cues from peer groups and the media (Riesman, 1965: 151-153). The limitations inherent in this approach were evident in their treatment of the rare dissenting voices that made it into their studies. For instance, Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead* (1943) is briefly discussed by Riesman, before being dismissed as a purely ‘escapist’ fantasy (Riesman, 1965: 156).

Overall, Riesman and Whyte’s willingness to pick and choose cultural texts reflected their general belief that the meaning of these texts is immediately comprehensible when read through an understanding of the wider structural arrangements of society. Yet, as the preceding chapters have made evident, even ostensibly straightforward cultural texts contain many layers of meaning. Running against the suggestion that the modern individual is a passive recipient of social circumstance, these stories exhibit a degree of self-reflexivity, conscious negotiation and even deliberate resistance that typically remained undetected in the analysis of the sociologists. Consequently, while they engage with the same themes as the sociologists—anxiety over the prospect of finding meaningful work, the shifting dynamics of family life, and the broader search for meaning—the nuance and complexity contained within these portraits is illustrative of a far greater resilience than was acknowledged by the sociologists. Read together, the four stories suggest that while the inflections may have changed, the search for meaning in work and family life remains an integral element of the moral imagination of the West.

While collectively these stories find enduring signs of cultural vitality in everyday life, their response to questions of ultimate meaning is less conclusive. From the outset, this thesis has engaged with Nietzsche’s and Weber’s suggestion that secularisation will inevitably lead to an aimless and dispirited consumerism. Here, the four stories point both ways. On the one hand, they depict the love of comfort and simple pleasures as essential features of the middle-class way of life. Indeed, there is no suggestion that the more ascetic elements of the Protestant Ethic continue to endure. On the other hand, there is little support for Nietzsche’s prophecy of the last man. Affluence, if anything, is the starting point in each of these stories, the position from which they engage with the big questions in life. Consequently, none of the
stories suggest that consumption has replaced work and family as the principle source of personal identity and fulfilment.

There is more support for the wider thesis of disenchantment. All of the case studies suggest that with the decline of an overarching metaphysical framework, modern life has come to be lived under conditions of uncertainty. The traditional religious answers to the big metaphysical questions have lost much of their authority. As a result, individuals are forced to decide for themselves what they find personally meaningful and significant. Read together, all of the stories suggest that this anxious search for meaning is a defining characteristic of life in the modern West. However, they also illustrate a different experience of disenchantment than that forecast by Nietzsche and Weber. With the obvious exception of Buddenbrooks, there is little to suggest that the modern world is cold and meaningless. Rather, there is an affective warmth and richness of experience in each of these stories that exists in tension with a growing intellectual sense of disintegration and incoherence. Importantly, these stories are also illustrative of a shift away from grand notions of redemption to finding contentment within the modest parameters of modern life. Consequently, the process of disenchantment is met not only with frustrations over what has been lost, but also gratitude over what remains.

This thesis began with Max Weber’s question ‘what shall I do and how shall I live my life?’ For Weber, the central failing of Western culture was its inability to provide an answer to this fundamental question. Describing the disenchanted modern world he declared:

It is not accidental that our greatest art is intimate and not monumental, nor is it accidental that today only within the smallest and intimate circles, in personal human situations, in pianissimo, that something is pulsating that corresponds to the prophetic pneuma, which in former times swept through the great communities like a firebrand, welding them together.

(Weber, 1946: 155)

The modern reader is liable to be deaf to the tone of despondency with which these words were uttered. Weber’s fallen present only gains its pathos when read against the ‘heroic’ bourgeois age that preceded it (Weber, 2001: 111). For contemporary ears that are tuned to the pianissimo rather than the fortissimo of former times, these words are more likely to be
met, not with the tragic sense with which they were intended, but with recognition and acceptance.
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