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Meditations in an emergency analysis

Released on August 17, 2009 by fisherprof In the first episode of Mad Men last season, Don Draper sits down for lunch one day and notices a young man next to him reading a copy of Meditations in an Emergency by Frank O'Hara. Chatting small, Don suggests that reading a book of poems makes you feel better sitting in a bar for lunch. You feel like you're doing something to you. The young man, looking at Don and noticing his pressed dress, perfectly cared for hair and shaved face, rejects this fraternal gesture, saying with an air of dismissal that yes, it is about doing things. With a time check, Don acknowledges the young man's tone but proceeds to ask if the collection is good. The man gives him one last look and replies: I don't think you'd like it. Don is apparently put in his place as a corporate shilling. For those of us who are regular viewers of the show, however, the young man's comment is pretty funny, because Don Draper – or Dick Whitman, as we know his name is – is much more than his appearance would lead to assume. Against the young man's advice at lunch, Don buys a copy of O'Hara's book and this collection plays a recurring role in the show, gradually evolving into a main motif during the second season to such an extent that the final episode is even titled Meditations in an Emergency. Frank O'Hara, apparently, has a lot to tell us about Don Draper. The use of O'Hara as the central touchstone for the second season could at first register as a surprise. O'Hara was one of the pillars of the New York School of Artists in the 1950s and 1960s. A gay man, he was an established and well-known poet and published a series of well-received volumes before his untimely death at the age of forty. He worked as an assistant curator at the Museum of Modern Art and was close to some of the most important painters of the time, including Willem de Kooning, Larry Rivers and Joan Mitchell. These biographical details don't really connote the life of Don Draper's Madison Avenue lifestyle. However, there is in O'Hara's poetry a crisis of identity and identification that evokes Don's life a lot. At the Commander, begins the first poem in Meditations in an Emergency, I wanted to make sure I reached you/even though my ship was on the way where it was captured/in some moorings. I'm always bonding/and then deciding to leave. These lines establish a theme of unrealised desire and ambivalence that O'Hara maintains throughout the collection. The speaker of O'Hara's poems rarely, if ever, achieves communion with another person. For example, in By Grace, after a party, the poem begins, You don't always know how I feel. In O'Hara's poems, the speaker's emotion is perpetually or its sign is missing, as if there were a fundamental alienation at stake that no one can violate. This tone seems very appropriate as a complement to Don Draper. During the first season of Mad Men we learned that on a special assignment in the Korean War, Dick Whitman was working alone with the real Don Draper when their base was attacked and Don was killed. Dick took advantage of the situation to change dogtags and assume Draper's identity, thus helping him escape a life that had very few promises of success. In this first season, however, Don repeatedly fought identity issues, including a brief reunion with his brother, who refused and later injured himself, leaving Don particularly alone at the end of that season. O'Hara's poetic style appears inviting and familiar, but maintains a strict distance. As a New York poet, he set most of his poems in the city where he was deeply rooted and fascinated. Crammed his work with references to specific city restaurants, clubs, and landmarks, O'Hara detailed the places and products someone in New York would encounter, giving his work tangible familiarity. In addition, in most of his poems he has built a first-person orator who not only refers to familiar places, but who uses a language of daily experience. At the same time, however, O'Hara's orator does little to reveal something of his emotional, intellectual, or spiritual essence. The corresponding distance resonates throughout O'Hara's work, making it a natural measure to read for Don Draper. At the end of the first episode of the second season, Don finishes reading O'Hara's collection, places a addressed envelope, seals it, and leaves it late at night in his neighborhood mailbox as he takes his dog for a walk, having made sure no one has seen him. As this action unfolds on screen, Don speaks in a voice-over, citing the fourth (and final) section of the collection's final poem, Mayakovsky: It could be the coldest day of the year, what do you think/that? I mean, what do I do? And if I do, /maybe I'm myself again. In the lines, what do you think/that? I mean, what do I do? The poem wonderfully evokes a crisis of identity that closely corresponds to what Don experiences during the show. Having adopted the name Don Draper and having masked like him for years, he has no close or even close friends. In fact, at the end of the first episode, we might ask ourselves, what would it mean for Don to be myself again? Who's the essential Don, or Dick Whitman? These are questions Don struggled with last season. Before Don place the book envelope, wrote a short note to the recipient of the parcel. It reads: It made me think of you -- D. We don't know the the of the package, nor because he reminded Don of her, until the twelfth episode of the season, when we discover that she was Anna Draper, the woman who was married to the real Don Draper. Anna lives in California, and at this point last season Don came to Los Angeles for work. She is in crisis: she has had a long relationship with a married woman, endangering her marriage and her power at work. His wife Betty found out about the relationship and kicked him out of his house. It is at this low point that he goes to see Anna, and that we begin to discover more of Don's background. In a series of flashbacks, we watch as Anna first challenges her authenticity when she moves to New York and adopts the name Don Draper, and we see them develop a close relationship over the years, at least in part because of the secret she has and that she agrees to keep in exchange for her financial support. In the end, Don seems comfortable with Anna, relaxed and comfortable in ways we don't see him with other people, not even Betty. He comes back to her now, in the present, because as he tells her, he has ruined everything and wants to understand what to do. This is the set for the return to O'Hara's collection, because in this episode we find out that Anna is the person to whom she sent the book, the one she thought about when she read the poems. In this key scene, Anna offers Don a tarot reading, during which, looking at the cards, she tells him that she is definitely in a strange place. But identify a card as the soul of the world. It's in a very important place here. This is you, the one you lead to reading. He says you're a part of the world: air, water, every little thing is connected to you. Don replies that this is a nice thought, but asks what it means. Anna replies: It means that the only thing that keeps you happy is the belief that you are alone. Anna not only comforts him in this reading, but also gives him the certainty of being part of a wider community. As Don listens to the reading, his eyes continue to drift towards the window as he feels the ocean breeze; in the final scene of the episode, he goes to the Pacific and walks fully clothed in the water. At that moment it is figuratively purified, reborn in a kind of baptism. In the final episode of the season, Don returns to New York, reconnected to the world, no longer alone. He returns to his job and manages to weather the storm of his company's merger with a British advertising agency with his position as intact creative director. Together with the rest of the country, the tension of the Cuban missile crisis persists. And perhaps most importantly, she reunites with Betty and her children, and at the end of the episode discovers that she is pregnant. The season ends with the two holding looking to each other, uncertain about the future but attached to each other like a family. Mad Men's use of O'Hara Meditations in an emergency to dramatize Don's crisis frames last season and his central question of what it means to create real and emotional connections with others - echoed in the stories of Betty, Peggy Olson, Pete Campbell, Joan Holloway, Roger Sterling and virtually every character on the show. In Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters, Marjorie Perloff argues that O'Hara's typical orator makes no attempt to reflect on the larger human condition, to derive meaning from a series of past incidents, or to make judgments about his former self. Don, on the contrary, seems to want to face the reality of the catastrophe of his personality and what he beat by creating such an emotional distance from those who love him, trust him and work with him. However, as we prepare to enter season three, it is still uncertain whether Don will actually be able to successfully immerse his complete self in this world of his creation and make sense of his life, especially when his true identity is a lie. One might wonder what it takes – to return to O'Hara's language in the final line of Mayakovsky – for Don to come back [himself]? Recorded below: Don Draper, Mad Men, Television | |

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