Sustaining and transgressing borders. The relationship between children and the elderly in Mad Men

Cecilia Lindgren and Johanna Sjöberg

Book Chapter

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Sustaining and Transgressing Borders
The Relationship Between Children and the Elderly in

*Mad Men*

Cecilia Lindgren and Johanna Sjöberg

Children and the elderly are, in various contexts, portrayed as ideal companions, and positioned as “others” in relation to the more powerful generation in between (Joosen 128, 136-138; Hockey and James 2-5). In children’s literature, for example, the relationship between the two age groups tends to be romanticized, featuring their mutual interests in nature, animals, fantasy and storytelling. In this chapter, we explore how the two categories meet in the award-winning drama TV series *Mad Men*. The aim is to scrutinize the link between childhood and old age, by analyzing how the relationships between a young girl, Sally Draper, and her elderly relatives are played out. Exploring key scenes, we show how thecompanionship between children and the elderly is constructed as rewarding for both parties, yet as provocative and challenging rather than romantic and harmless.

*Mad Men* is produced by Matthew Weiner and was originally broadcast by the US channel AMC. Since then, it has been featured in at least three dozen countries across America, Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Australia (Edgerton xxi). It premiered in July 2007, and the seventh and final season was aired in 2015. *Mad Men* centers on a fictional Madison Avenue advertising agency in the 1960s and ‘70s, featuring the working lives and personal relations of men and women at the office. The series has been praised for its production and accuracy in period detail. It has also received criticism for stereotypical depictions of, among others, cigarette and alcohol consumption and for implicitly approving sexism (Ferrucci, Shoenberger and Schauster 93). Researchers from several fields have found *Mad Men* worthy of scholarly study. Even though time, age and intergenerational relationships are central to the plot, only a few studies (Baruha; Dole; Marcovitch and Batty) draw attention to these aspects.

*Mad Men* pays great attention to period detail and integrates significant historic events in its storyline, yet most scholars agree that the series is not, and should not be read as, a historic reconstruction of the period in which it is set (Batty 192; Beail and Goren 4, 22; Black and Driscoll 190; Goodlad et al. 2; Polan 36, 48). Rather, the series uses historical fiction to say something about our present and to address issues that are ever so urgent, such as sexism, racism, family relations and child-rearing (Baruah 13; Batchelor 70; Colton Josephson 272; Wilson and Lane 77). Linda Beail and Lilly Goren (2015) argue that *Mad Men* tells stories “that illuminate our continuing political dilemmas of freedom, identity, inclusion, consumption, and authenticity” (4), and they point out that the show’s creator, Matthew Weiner, has described it as “science fiction” set in the past. Telling stories that takes place in the 1960s, however, also serves to challenge popular and idealizing narratives about this period. *Mad Men* subverts nostalgia and destabilizes
romantic notions of life, and specifically family life, in the post-war era (Baruah 3-13; Colton Josephson 261-263).

Julia Wilson and Joseph Lane (2012) read the series as a text about family and childrearing, portraying a family that constantly fails to live up to both past and present expectations. They conclude that “Mad Men operates to invoke our idealizations of family life and then to collapse them” (83). The children in the series serve as identification points and offer a moral corrective, and Sally Draper in particular has been put forward as a key to understanding the series’ perspective and relationship to the past (Baruah 8; Batty 196, 202; Beail and Goren 21, 24; Dole 185; Matcovitch and Batty xii). As Nancy Batty (2012) so elegantly puts it, however, the Mad Men children are often excluded from the adult world, and are “either viewers of the adult dramas enacted around them or exiled to their rooms, left to ponder what the future will hold for them” (203).

In the course of the series, the characters grow older and evolve. Intergenerational relationships are brought to the fore as several characters experience difficulties with their parents, in-laws or children. Moreover, generational gaps between older and younger professionals at the agency are one of the show’s central themes (Baruha 9-10; Miggelbrink 8). Dafna Lemish and Varda Muhlbauer (165-166) point out that media images travel around the world in a profit-driven market. Representations of gender and age categories in television and film are thus influential and should be subjected to critical analysis (Lepianka 1096). We argue that studying children and the elderly, and so-called “intergenerational bonds” (Taylor 12) in Mad Men can deepen our understanding of how the two age categories are constructed and presented in visual media for an international audience.

Visual representations of children and elderly
Chronological age and age categories shape most societies. Age norms, akin to a socially constructed clock, constitute expectations about appropriate times and ages for particular achievements and transitions in life. Hence, age is socially constructed (Krekula, Närvänen and Näsman 83) and so are the borders for childhood and senescence. Being classified as a child or an old person carries with it various expectations and prejudices (Fineman 3). The result is an order that is not natural or neutral, but culturally constructed and hierarchical. The construction of age is, similar to constructions of gender and ethnicity, closely connected to relations of power (Krekula, Närvänen and Näsman 83; Fineman 56-57).

Visual media studies on age are rare, compared to studies on gender or ethnicity. There are studies focusing on, for example, the dissonances between the proportion of elderly people in society and their visibility on TV. Media researchers Tim Healey and Karen Ross (105-106) and Lemish and Muhlbauer (166-167) argue that the television landscape mostly comprises younger adults, that is the middle generation, and that older people are generally under-represented. They are typically cast to play secondary characters in supporting roles and represented in a stereotypical manner. Aging is furthermore often negatively constructed and characterized by the absence of good health and mental clarity, and as a period of helplessness, physical vulnerability, dependency,
meanness, bitterness and lack of productivity (Lemish and Muhlbauer 166; Lepianka 1108). Representations of the elderly on television hence support the dominant “decline narrative” of growing old (Gullette 6-7). Particularly under-represented and negatively stereotyped in media are older women. The powerful female image of motherhood is replaced by the controlling and nagging old mother or mother-in-law. Older women are less likely than older men to be presented as authority figures, for example at a workplace, and their bodies are often displayed as objects of ridicule rather than as sexual bodies of desire. Consequently, they suffer from the double marginalization of age and gender (Lemish and Muhlbauer 169-171).

Children too are an under-represented category, yet they are seen in a range of visual imagery (Holland). Karen Lury (2010) has studied children in films produced for an adult audience. Taking an interest in how children are seen to participate in the adult world, she examines whether and how children’s subjectivity, emotions, experiences and thoughts can be represented, and questions if it is possible to identify and represent the “childish-ness of the child” (10). Lury argues that, from a filmmakers’ point of view, the children’s contribution is to allow for different types of reflections and filmic worlds. Anne Higonnet (1998) has argued that contemporary pictures and art showing children indicate a turning point in how children are visually defined. Although most images are romantic, showing innocent children, a “knowing child” is portrayed more and more frequently—a child who understands more about the adult world than the notion of the innocent child would allow. The “knowing” child is not presented as easily accessible or controllable, or as an object for visual pleasure. Instead of being placed in their own protected world, children are subjects in a multi-faceted existence. These children are, however, also potentially appalling, since they do not easily fit the norms of childhood (Higonnet 12, 207). In her analysis of the mediation of family and childhood in popular culture, and especially in film and on TV from the 1950s onwards, Estella Tincknell (2005) observes a greater flexibility in how children are presented. She argues that the idea of childhood is currently being challenged and that rigid divisions between knowledge and innocence, and between adulthood and childhood, are destabilized (Tincknell 98-101).

To find studies specifically dealing with the relationship between children and the elderly in fiction, one can turn to research on children’s literature. In her study on contemporary children’s books and Young Adult fiction, Vanessa Joosen (128) finds that a relationship with an older person is portrayed as beneficial for children and their development, in that it fosters their imagination, agency, and emotional strength. She addresses the trope of “the wise old mentor;” an elderly person who “guides the young to knowledge and understanding” (131). Even though this entails a positive image of the elderly it has been criticized for being one-dimensional. Because wisdom is typically associated with balanced reflection it tends to exclude strong feelings, such as anger or passion, and the elderly are depicted as having no needs of their own (131).

**Characters and family relations in Mad Men**

The characters in *Mad Men* are numerous and complex. Due to experimental storytelling techniques (Miggelbrink 2-4), some of them occur frequently while others are present in
only one episode or season, never to return again or to stay absent for a long time. Most characters are men and women in their twenties, thirties or forties. They live busy lives at work, and/or they function as parents and housewives in the city and the local community. Don Draper (Jon Hamm) is the leading character in the show. He is a creative genius, a businessman, and also an army deserter, a womanizer and a fraud (Falklof 31-32). Together with Betty (January Jones), he has two boys and a girl.

Sally Draper (Kiernan Shipka), born in 1954, is the oldest of Don and Betty’s three children and represents the American “Baby boomer generation.” As Nancy Batty (194-196) illustrates, some viewers may have memories and experiences that through Sally can be reevaluated. It is, however, important to point out that most viewers, from various countries and age groups, do not have any personal connections to the time, place or lifestyle portrayed in Mad Men (Batty 192). Sally has been described as one of the most vexed characters in the series (Polan 50). She is also the most prominent of the children in the series, becoming more central to the storyline as she grows older (Baruha 8; Beail and Goren 21). Don, who is described as having a genuine love for his children, does not live up to the image of the good father, as he is portrayed as selfish, often drunk and preoccupied with work, constantly failing his promises to the children (Falklof 39-41).

Housewife Betty is not portrayed as an ideal parent either (Davidson 141), coming across instead as narcissistic, immature and dissatisfied (Tudor 337). Parents, and the middle generation at large, expect Sally and other children to obey adults; in return they are cared for and protected, which often means being excluded from actions and information (Batty 203).

Betty’s father, Gene Hofstadt, a widower in his seventies, is portrayed as having a close relationship with his granddaughter Sally. In the third season, he starts showing signs of dementia and moves into the Drapers’ house. Later in the same season he passes away. Compared to other elderly characters, such as protagonists’ parents and in-laws, and particularly the young-at-heart advertising boss Bertrand Cooper, Gene is a stereotypical weakened old man. After Betty re-marries in season four, the children are, to Sally’s dislike, sometimes left in the care of their new step-grandmother Pauline Francis, a corpulent housewife in her sixties or early seventies. Pauline, who has a peripheral role in the series, is constructed as a firm and in some respects bitter lady.

Sally, Gene and Pauline represent two age groups, children and the elderly, that are excluded from the busy professional sphere where the main plots in the series are played out. They are primarily seen in the domestic sphere, at times only assigned to each other. In such scenes, “intergenerational bonding” is brought to the fore. Predominantly, Mad Men reproduces the middle generation as the powerful norm, while children and elderly are set aside as “others,” bound to act their age. Some interesting scenes in the series take place when the young and the old interact together, escaping the supervision of the parents or other adults.

Analyzing key scenes
By analyzing key scenes we aim to scrutinize the roles and relationships ascribed to children and the elderly. Emphasis is put on the visual material itself, as we explore how
"Mad Men" as a visual form of meaning making constructs specific views of the social world (Rose 146-147). Consequently, we do not analyze the production site or study how the series is interpreted by its audiences. Our analyses of how the relationship between children and the elderly is constructed do not aim to test the series’ representation in relation to research about family life and family norms in the US in the 1960s. Instead, when scrutinizing how borders of childhood are sustained, stretched and transgressed we refer to age norms established within the series itself. There are several examples of how Sally’s parents, and especially Don, set limits for what children should do and know about, and thereby define borders of childhood: children should not know about politics (S1E12), attend funerals (S3E5), watch upsetting news (S3E12; see also Batty 203) or do things that are “too dangerous,” such as horse-back riding (S2E1). Children should not wear women’s boots or makeup (S5E7) and they should definitely not be smoking (S2E12) or exploring their sexuality (S4E5). Furthermore, grandparents are expected to respect these boundaries and, for instance, not let children know too much about war or death (S3E4). The parents’ obvious ambitions to keep childhood and adulthood separate makes the relationship between children and the elderly in the series particularly interesting.

The analysis focuses on two episodes in which the relationship between the old and the young is brought to the fore: “The Arrangements” from season three, and “Mystery date” from season five. The material consists of five scenes where children and the elderly spend time together. Two scenes focus on Sally and her grandfather, and another three on her and her step-grandmother. Our analysis will concentrate on verbal and visual actions that construct age relations between the child and the elderly. What characteristics and actions are ascribed to the child, Sally, and what to her grandfather and step-grandmother, Gene and Pauline? How are the roles of children and the elderly negotiated and contested?

For analytical purposes, the scenes were transcribed, with a left column describing the course of events, non-verbal actions and camera angles, and a right column accounting for audible dialogue. The two were matched according to the timing of the sequence. In the following, print screen images, descriptive text, dialogue extracts and two-column excerpts are used to present the analyzed material.

In the analysis we make use of the concepts of “gatekeeper” and “enabler” to characterize what goes on between the characters and what roles they take on in relation to norms of childhood and grandparenthood. These concepts have previously been used in various fields of study, such as psychology, medicine, informatics, sociology and education, and with different meanings depending on the context (Barzilai-Nahon; Ehmann et al.). Here, we use “gatekeeper” to describe a person whom one has to pass to enter certain territories (literally or symbolically), to do certain things or to get certain information. The gatekeeper has the power and means to prevent someone else from doing something or from accessing information. We use “enabler” to describe a person who allows for something to happen or who makes it possible for someone to do something that he or she would not be able to accomplish without help or support.
An empowering and challenging companionship
In the episode “The Arrangements,” Sally is about eight or nine years old and spends quite a lot of time together with her grandfather Gene, who now lives with the Draper family. The two contrasting scenes to be analyzed here illustrate how the child and the old person can be ascribed very different roles in the same setting—going to school by car.

“You got to really pay attention”

The first scene starts with Sally, Bobby and Gene leaving the house, walking towards a parked car. In the next cut, the viewer sees Bobby in the back seat while hearing Gene’s voice, commenting on the houses they drive by:

I don’t care if it’s windy or rainy. There’s no reason for a shake roof to fall if it’s laid right. Except for that one. No flashing around the chimney. That’s gonna cost them. He he.

Cut and camera movement first prevent the viewer from seeing where Gene and Sally are placed in the car. Therefore it takes a few seconds to realize that Gene, who becomes visible at the front passenger seat, is not driving, as would be expected. Instead, it is Sally, dressed in a stiff white shirt and check jacket, who drives the car (Image 1). She looks concentrated while Gene is exalted. He starts shouting at a car honking at them from behind: “GO AROUND!” They seem to be moving too slowly. Gene turns to Sally and says:

Now I’m gonna push it up to 25 miles an hour. That’s what we’re allowed to do here.

Sally does not reach the pedals but Gene presses the gas with his left foot from the side. He controls the pedals while she steers the wheel. Bobby, in the back seat, looks relaxed. Both Sally and Gene looks straight ahead, at the road. In an encouraging voice, Gene says to Sally: “You got to really pay attention.” As she keeps going along the road, she starts smiling.

Image 1, Sally drives (“The Arrangements”, 00.59)
In this scene, Sally is positioned by Gene as an adult. He lets her do something that is not allowed for a child her age, and he is also talking to her as an adult, about the construction of roofs in the neighborhood. Nevertheless, her inability to reach down to the pedals, which means that she needs help to drive, signals that she is in fact a child. She is a child doing what adults do. At first, her facial expression reveals that she is out of place, but then her smile says that she accepts the role of a child visiting the adult world, and that she enjoys it.

To do what adults do, Sally is, however, dependent on Gene in several ways. For her to drive the car he must give permission and he must operate the gas and brake pedals. In this scene, Gene acts as an enabler, making it possible for Sally to transgress the borders of childhood. He also lets her do something that is obviously not allowed, that could be dangerous and that her parents would certainly not approve of. So, is Gene portrayed as a senile old man who cannot act responsibly? Not necessarily. He appears to know that Sally cannot really drive and while letting her do so he informs her how fast they are allowed to go and stresses that she must pay attention. Hence, when helping Sally to transgress the borders of childhood, and the law, he also acts as her guide into the adult world.

That Gene’s behavior has a pedagogical purpose, and he is not simply confused, is supported by another scene in the same episode where they eat ice cream together (while afraid to get caught by Betty) and Gene tries to boost Sally’s self-esteem. When he asks her if she remembers her grandmother Ruth, she replies that Grandma once gave her an ukulele. When Gene asks her if she learnt how to play and she says “No”, he says to her: “You can, you know. You’re smart. [...] You can really do something. Don’t let your mother tell you otherwise.” Gene challenges Betty Draper’s authority, assuring Sally that she is smart and that she can accomplish things. When letting her drive the car he defies not only her parents’ authority, but any authority (even the law) that postulates what children can do, and he lets her experience that she can do things she did not know she could. Gene thus helps Sally to transgress the borders of childhood and lets her have a foretaste of adulthood. If we assume that parents do not expect grandparents to let children do potentially dangerous or illegal things, Gene can also be said to transgress the borders of grandparenthood.

To summarize, in this scene the positions of the child and the old man have been, literally as well as symbolically, unsettled. The old man does not fulfill the role of a responsible caring adult, but instead he is the enabler who lets the child visit the world of adults, and who acts as her guide and educator. The child takes the position of an adult, but is still dependent on her guide to do so. In the car, they have changed places, but they actually meet in driving (managing the steering wheel and the pedals respectively) and together they break the law as well as challenge the normative borders of childhood and old age.
“Don’t keep me waiting”

In the second scene the setting is the same, with Gene taking the kids to school, but the roles of the child and the grandfather, and the relationship between them, are played out in a different way.

The car appears again, driving in the middle of the road. The next cut shows Gene driving and Sally sitting beside him in the passenger seat. Bobby is in the back seat, eating a sandwich. Gene says in a firm and harsh voice: “What the hell is that?” Bobby replies “It’s an English muffin”, and Gene says: “The hell it is. Put it away. You can eat at school.” Sally turns towards Gene and says: “I already ate my breakfast.” She smiles and looks content. Gene looks back at her with love. Then his face turns serious and he says: “Don’t keep me waiting this afternoon. I want you dressed and ready for ballet at 3.00 on the button. No dawdling.” “Okay”, Sally says chipperly. Gene tells them he is going to buy fruit, and asks what they want. Sally answers, in a childish, lisping voice “Peaches please”. When Bobby protests by saying “Peaches give me a rash” Gene yells at him: “Your sister likes them!” Gene looks moody, and Sally a bit insecure.

In this scene, Gene and Sally are back in their expected positions, both literally and symbolically. Gene talks to her and Bobby in a disciplinary voice, showing he expects them to obey. He keeps watch over what they eat and when, and requests Sally to be in time for afternoon activities. At the same time he shows willingness to meet the kids’ wishes (at least Sally’s, who is clearly favored) by asking them what fruit to buy. He hence acts according to what would be expected from a grandparent, namely to be a supervising and responsible caregiver who may spoil the children a little. Sally, in turn, is given, and takes, the role of the child. She relates to Gene as an adult authority, trying to please him by saying she has had her breakfast properly at home and by gladly accepting his lecture about keeping time. Her position as a child is also consolidated by the way she is dressed, in a girly pink dress and white blouse with a red waistband, and by her childish lisping voice (Image 2). Here, no borders are challenged or transgressed.

The analysis of these two scenes makes clear that the roles of the child and the grandfather, and the relationship between them, are not fixed but rather explored and stretched in interesting ways. In the very same setting, the routine of going to school, the
grandfather acts as the enabler who lets the child transgress the normative borders of childhood, but also as the disciplining adult who sees to it that the children do what they are expected to. The child, Sally, acts as a child but also as an adult. With her grandfather’s blessing and help, she does things that are not considered to be an appropriate part of childhood. Her different positions are emphasized by the way she is dressed: in a strict white shirt and check jacket when she drives the car, and in a sweet pink dress when she sits beside Gene acting like a good girl (Image 1 & Image 2).

From these scenes in the car, we can conclude that the pairing of childhood and old age in Mad Men is not constructed in a straightforward way. Gene and Sally are portrayed as ideal companions, at least from their own perspective, and their relationship is implied to be rewarding for both parties. It is worth pointing to Wesley Colbath’s interesting analysis of the function of cars in Mad Men as “the site for major changes in interpersonal relations of power and privacy” (133). Here, in the car, Gene and Sally escape the supervision of Don and Betty, and both gain power in relation to each other. With Sally, Gene regains his position as an adult in charge, which he seems to have lost in his everyday life. To her he is not a confused old man who needs to be taken care of, but a competent adult who can guide and educate the younger generation. Sally, on her part, gets a lot of positive attention and responsibility from Gene. She is not just a child that needs to be raised but also a companion and a friend, and she is believed to be competent. Their relationship is thus constructed as empowering, but also as provocative in relation to what children and grandparents can be expected to do. Sally and Gene both challenge the normative borders of their age groups and roles, and, when transgressing the borders of childhood and grandparenthood they do potentially dangerous things.

An unholy alliance
In the episode “Mystery date” from season five, Sally is twelve years old and the news about the Chicago murders is all over the papers and on everybody’s lips. It refers to an actual event in 1966 when a man raped and killed eight student nurses. A ninth girl hid under a bed and survived. In this episode Sally and her brother are left in the care of their new step-grandmother Pauline, while their mother and her husband are out of town. In a series of three scenes the relationship between Sally and Pauline evolves in an interesting way, as both take on different roles.

“Some things are not for children”
In the first scene Sally, Bobby and Pauline are sitting at the kitchen table. Sally looks bored and she has not touched her sandwich. Pauline is reading the newspaper. She tells Sally to eat her sandwich, but Sally replies she is not hungry. Pauline focuses on her reading and as she makes some comments, Sally becomes interested:
In this scene, Sally tries to get information about the news, which she seems to understand is really horrifying. Symbolically, she attempts to move beyond the scope of childhood and look into the adult world. She wants to know what is happening, but she is dependent on Pauline to let her. Throughout the scene, however, Pauline refuses to let her in. She instead fulfills the role of gatekeeper and makes sure that the door to the adult world is kept shut, and the borders of innocent childhood upheld.

Through a series of utterances and gestures Pauline pins Sally down to the role of a child: she explicitly refers to her as a child (“Some things are not for children”), slaps her, refers to her “behavior,” which her mother would not approve of, and makes her eat the food she does not like. When Sally tries to breach the limits of childhood Pauline pushes her back. She consequently restores their conversation to one between a child and an adult, until she, at the end of the scene, marks the end of that conversation by unfolding the newspaper again.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sally</th>
<th>Pauline</th>
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<td>In this scene, Sally tries to get information about the news, which she seems to understand is really horrifying. Symbolically, she attempts to move beyond the scope of childhood and look into the adult world. She wants to know what is happening, but she is dependent on Pauline to let her. Throughout the scene, however, Pauline refuses to let her in. She instead fulfills the role of gatekeeper and makes sure that the door to the adult world is kept shut, and the borders of innocent childhood upheld. Through a series of utterances and gestures Pauline pins Sally down to the role of a child: she explicitly refers to her as a child (“Some things are not for children”), slaps her, refers to her “behavior,” which her mother would not approve of, and makes her eat the food she does not like. When Sally tries to breach the limits of childhood Pauline pushes her back. She consequently restores their conversation to one between a child and an adult, until she, at the end of the scene, marks the end of that conversation by unfolding the newspaper again.</td>
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Pauline holds the newspaper as a barrier between Sally and herself, and also, symbolically, as a barrier between what children are allowed to know and what she as an adult knows. Pauline thus shuts Sally out, leaving her with no more information than the newspaper's headline “NATION HUNTS MASS KILLER” (Image 3). Ironically, she thereby protects Sally from information while still flashing the abridged gruesome facts at her. Here, we see no closeness or companionship between the generations, but rather distance and confrontation. A struggle is established that continues in the next scene.

“How old are you?”

Sally lies in the sofa in front of the TV. Pauline sits in the same room, talking with someone on the phone. When Sally hears Pauline talk about the murders, and the ninth girl who survived, she sits up and listens. Pauline says in a low voice:

Oh, that poor thing. Paralyzed with fear while he opened the door eight times. And dragged another one out. And then...

When Pauline notices that Sally looks at her and listens, she interrupts herself in mid sentence and changes the conversation. In a loud voice she explains to the person she talks to that, even though she wants to, she cannot make any plans as long as she takes care of the children. She hangs up, and turns towards Sally:
In this scene, Sally is eager to find out about the murders, to get some information about the events that the adults read and talk about. Just like in the previous scene, however, Pauline pushes her back and positions her as a child. We see a struggle between the child acting like a challenging teenager, wanting to be let into the adult conversation, and the old woman acting as a gatekeeper, trying to sustain the borders of childhood. It is played out almost like a duel. When Sally eavesdrops, Pauline closes her phone call. She orders Sally to take out the trash and threatens to punish her if she does not obey. Sally tries to negotiate and suggests an exchange of favors. Pauline says no in a way that makes clear she would never bargain with a child. Sally’s question “How old are you?” implies that Pauline is old and square, and that her standards are obsolete. Yet again she tries to reason with Pauline, saying she is a “good person,” but the woman insists on talking to her, and treating her, as a child. In her world, discipline rather than inclusion is what turns children into adults.

In this scene too, the step-grandmother, Pauline, fulfills the role of a strict adult authority, rather than a companion or confidant. As a gatekeeper, aiming to maintain the borders of childhood, she does not tell children things they are not supposed to know and she definitely does not negotiate with them. Sally does not accept being positioned as a child. In trying to stretch the limits set up by her step-grandmother, she alternates between questioning her adult authority and trying to negotiate with her to get what she wants. Even though Pauline refers to them both being “girls,” the distance between them is consolidated and manifested through Sally’s utterance: “How old are you?” In the last scene to be analyzed, however, they take on new roles and the relationship between them changes in an interesting way.

“You’re old enough to know”

In a very short cut, preceding the scene transcribed below, Sally lies in bed under a blanket with a flashlight reading the newspaper. The headline says “Nurses’ Slayer Eludes
Dragnet” and Sally, who now realizes that the murderer is still on the loose, looks terrified. A few minutes later the show returns to Pauline sitting in the dark living room in a nightgown, reading a book and eating snacks. Sally turns up in the doorway. She is dressed in a short frilly nightgown and holds the flashlight in her hand. Pauline, who doesn’t see her at first, gets startled:

Whereas Sally in the two previous scenes has taken the position of a soon-to-be teenager wanting to know about the adult world, she here acts out the role of a child. She is portrayed as a little girl who has learnt about things she cannot handle, and her

<table>
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<th>Excerpt 3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pauline puts away her book.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sally comes into the room and sits down beside Pauline.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sally points down to the space between them at the sofa.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pauline picks up a big knife lying there, and moves it to her other side.</td>
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**Pauline in compassionate voice:**

Pauline, slowly and clearly:

Sally listens wide-eyed.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S: I'm sorry. I can't sleep.</td>
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<tr>
<td>P: Well you can't sneak up to someone my age, especially in this house.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: I'm scared. Can I sit with you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P: Only for a bit.</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S: What's that for?</td>
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<tr>
<td>P: Why are you scared?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: I read the newspaper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P: Oh, honey. Did you pull it out of the trash?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: Why did that man do that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P: Well, probably because he hates his mother.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: I don't understand what happened.</td>
</tr>
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<td>P: What happened? Those girls got ready for bed and there was this knock on the door. And a handsome man was there. And maybe one of them knew him. But probably not. Because he was probably just watching them from afar. All those young innocent nurses. In their short uniforms. Stirring his desire.</td>
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<tr>
<td>S: For what?</td>
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<tr>
<td>P: What do you think? You're old enough to know.</td>
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<tr>
<td>S: Why didn't they run away?</td>
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<tr>
<td>P: Because they were scared. They probably thought he can't rape nine of us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: Why not?</td>
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<tr>
<td>P: You just can't. They didn't know it was going to be worse than that. Hmm. They didn't know what was in store for them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>S: Now I'm really scared.</td>
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<tr>
<td>P: It's not going to happen. Not while I've got my burglar alarm.</td>
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<tr>
<td>S: How am I going to sleep?</td>
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<tr>
<td>P: Get the water.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: What is that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P: It's Seconal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P: Do you know how to take a pill?</td>
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|  |
“childlessness” is emphasized by the girly nightgown that leaves her legs bare. She comes to Pauline to seek company and security, but Pauline is also afraid and has brought a knife for protection. In this situation their relationship, and their way of communicating, takes a new direction. It is almost as if they meet on neutral ground, vulnerable in their nightgowns in the dark house, where they take on new roles. Pauline is now kind and compassionate. She lets Sally stay with her, even though she should be in bed. When Sally silently admits to having pulled the newspaper out of the trash and read it, she does not get angry. Instead she says “Oh, honey” and starts explaining what happened. Consequently, she finally resigns from her post as a gatekeeper and lets Sally through, to explore the horrors of the adult world. In doing so Pauline assumes the role of an enabler: she is still the one in charge, not by means of discipline but because of her knowledge, and Sally is still dependent on her. Pauline turns into Sally’s guide and educator, and together they challenge the borders of childhood.

The ultimate transgression happens when Pauline lets Sally take the sleeping pill (Image 4). In that moment she, just like Gene, oversteps the normative boundaries of a responsible grandparent. This also becomes evident later, in a scene where Sally’s mother and stepfather come home to find Pauline passed out in the living room. When they cannot make contact with her, they get worried and start looking for the children. They do not spot what the TV viewer can see, that Sally is lying on the floor underneath the sofa, mirroring the position of the ninth girl who escaped the murderer by hiding under the bed.

In the series of scenes analyzed above, Pauline’s transition from gatekeeper to enabler corresponds with Sally’s transition from a challenging soon-to-be teenager to a scared little child. It is not until Sally accepts and acts out the role of an innocent child that Pauline lets her into the adult world. This seems like a paradox. When Sally was eager to know about the murders, Pauline’s answer was: “Some things are not for children.” When she is scared and shows her ignorance by asking a child’s questions about sexual desire, Pauline says: “You’re old enough to know.” Apparently Pauline does not see her as an innocent little girl after all. How can we explain that shift? Why does Pauline suddenly seem to enjoy telling Sally this gruesome story, making her even more scared? When re-
reading the previous scenes with these questions in mind, one possible interpretation is that Pauline was careless, throwing the newspaper in the trash and then asking Sally to take it out. Yet another, more plausible interpretation would be that she actually arranged for Sally to find the newspaper. It is worth noticing that when Sally comes to her for comfort, Pauline immediately knows she has found the paper in the trash. It is then not surprising that she does not get angry, but willingly tells Sally everything.

This interpretation sheds new light on the role ascribed to Pauline as a step-grandmother, and her relationship to the child in her care. In front of Sally, and implicitly also in front of Sally’s parents, Pauline upholds the act of the supervising adult, disciplining the child and maintaining the borders of childhood. Behind the scenes, however, she takes the role of the enabler who secretly helps the child to stretch those borders. In doing so, she gets the satisfaction of being an expert, teaching her disciple about the world without having to defend her actions if questioned. This may also seem to be a way for Pauline to manage her own fears. Pauline thus artfully maneuvers between what grandparents could be expected to do and not do.

Just as in the scenes with Sally and Gene, the relationship between the child and the grandparent is not simple and straightforward, but indeed complex. Sally’s relationship with Pauline, however, is quite different from that with Gene. Sally and Pauline are not ideal companions. The relationship is not rewarding to either party. Pauline claims that she cannot go out because she has to watch the kids, and Sally is forced to spend time with someone she thinks is not only old but also old-fashioned and rigid. Nevertheless, they both get something out of it: Pauline (sees to it that she) gets the satisfaction of being the expert, introducing a young novice to the events of a spectacular crime, and Sally gets the information she wants. Consequently, both are empowered by their forced relationship and together they stretch the borders childhood and grandparenthood. This challenge is manifested as Pauline shares with Sally her sleeping pill, a pill that is the privilege of the knowing adult but that serves to escape the anxiety and fear that could follow from that knowledge.

**Conclusion**
The scenes from *Mad Man* that we have analyzed show that the roles of children and the elderly are constantly negotiated and fluid—they can be fixed in a certain situation but not in the relationship as such. The elderly take on the roles of both gatekeeper and enabler in relation to the child. When they act as gatekeepers they see to it that the kids eat properly and are in time for their activities. They also discipline them and make sure they behave as children are expected. The gatekeeper hence sustains the borders of childhood. The enabler, in contrast, lets the child explore the adult world, to know and to do things that may not be considered suitable for a child. The enabler is the guide when entering forbidden territory, and hence helps the child to stretch the borders of childhood.

The child, in this case Sally, also takes on different roles in relation to the grandparents. Sometimes she accepts being positioned as a child, and complies with what is expected of her; at other times she resists. She also evolves in the course of the series, as she grows older. In the first scenes analyzed (from season three), Sally is portrayed as
both wanting to be a good girl and a young woman learning how to drive a car. Later, in season five, we see a soon-to-be teenager who resists being treated and disciplined like a small child. She tries to move beyond the scope of childhood to be included in adult conversation. When she succeeds, however, she has difficulties handling the information she has gained and she takes the position of a little girl who needs comfort and protection. When the elderly are portrayed as enablers they make it possible for the child to transgress the borders of childhood, and as such they themselves transgress the borders of grandparenthood. When Sally and Gene change places in driving the car, and when Sally and Pauline share the sleeping pill, they also challenge the power and authority of the middle generation. Consequently, their relationship is not primarily harmless or preservative but challenging and subversive.

We can hence conclude that the *Mad Men* portrayal of children and the elderly, and the relationship between them, is indeed complex. In general, the elderly may be represented according to ageist stereotypes, as dependent and weak, as confused like Gene, and as bitter and controlling like Pauline (Lemish and Muhlbauer 166; Lepianka 1108). In their relationship with the child, however, they step out of the stereotypes. In Sally's company, Gene gains strong and confident authority and Pauline finally becomes the confidant and expert to whom the child wants to listen, instead of the aloof and dismissive step-grandmother she despises. Furthermore, the age gap between Sally and Pauline is bridged when they, as females, join in their fear of the Chicago rapist and murderer. This does not mean, however, that they are constructed instead as “wise old mentors” (Joosen 131). They do guide the young girl to knowledge and understanding, but they come across as neither mild and wise nor as having no needs of their own. On the contrary, as mentors they let the child explore the horrors of the adult world and do potentially dangerous things. Consequently, in their interaction with children, these elderly figures are neither constructed in accordance with a “decline narrative” (Gullette 6-7), or as one-dimensional old people that are only sensible and kind.

Sally on her part personifies, in her relationship with Gene and Pauline, both the romantic “innocent child,” the sweet little girl who needs protection, and “the knowing child” who, thanks to the elderly, stretches and transgresses the borders of childhood and becomes part of a more complex adult world. The knowing child, who drives the car, learns about rape and murder and takes a sleeping pill to manage her fears, does not fit the norms of childhood (Higonnet 12, 207). The portrayal of Sally thus illustrates the destabilization of the division in film and on TV between innocence and knowledge, and between childhood and adulthood, which Tincknell has observed (98-101).

*Mad Men* has been described as a period drama series that subverts nostalgia and dispels romantic images of family life in the 1960s and today. It reminds us, Wilson and Lane argue (77-79, 83-84, 88), to meet any idealized narrative with skepticism. Our analysis has shown that *Mad Men* also serves to destabilize the romantic pairing of childhood and old age. The companionship between children and the elderly is constructed as rewarding for both parties, but as norm-breaking and potentially dangerous rather than idyllic and harmless. Together, they stretch the borders of childhood and grandparenthood and challenge the authority of the generation in between.
Works cited


Endnotes

1 The topics that have been scrutinized include visual style and sound (Anderson; Butler; Yacovar), narration (Miggelbrink; Newcomb; O’Sullivan; Lavery), representation of the past (Baruha; Beall and Goren; Black and Driscoll; Tudor), masculinity (Falklof; Lair and Strasser; Witzig), gender roles (Ferrucci, Shoenerberger and Schauster; White; Haralovich; Akass and McCabe), women and family (Marcovitch and Batty), femininity and race (De La Torre).