

Real Phonies: Performativity in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *Mad Men*

Nathalie Childs

*Breakfast at Tiffan's is the book that made Truman Capote famous, launching him not only as a best-selling author, but as a celebrity, a person welcomed into the homes and hearts of the rich and famous. Breakfast ratified Capote's long-standing ambition to make it big as a writer, and it initiated a life that in some ways resembled that of his most famous, or at least his best-loved, character, Holly Golightly. Like her, Capote came from the rural south. His early years were not as desperate as his character's, but they were rough enough to justify our sense that Capote had a personal investment in Holly's escape, in her transition to fast-paced life in New York, and her lingering anxiety about how long the good times will last. One also has a sense that the inner demons that propelled Capote's problems with drink and drugs are somehow figured in Holy's "mean reds." Though Capote seems himself to have provoked his expulsion from his society friends' circles – by transparently using their confidences in his very popular journalism – the anxiety about really belonging that is present in the character of Holly Golightly, and the sense that sincerity is probably an illusion in any case, seems to have been part of Capote's personally. One can see something of Capote the write in the narrator of *Breakfast*, a figure who is on the sidelines, observing and learning. But we also imagine Holly as an expression of Capote's sense that the self must be performed, that the great opportunities of life lie in the unlimited possibilities of one's performance. But in Holly we also see the terror of "not knowing what's yours."*

-Dr. Bruce Greenfield.

"Is she or ain't she?

Ain't she what?

A phony.

I wouldn't have thought so.

You're wrong. She is phony. But on the other hand you're right. She isn't a phony because she's a *real* phony. She believes all this crap she believes. You can't talk her out of it."¹

Truman Capote's 1958 novella *Breakfast at Tiffany's* presented the world with the infamous character of Holly Golightly, immortalized by the pearl-wearing Audrey Hepburn in the 1961 film adaptation. Don Draper, the main character of the celebrated American television drama *Mad Men* seems an odd figure to compare with the woman who has come to symbolize carefree elegance and femininity: where Holly is a woman insistent on freedom from possessions and defiant of convention at every opportunity, Don is emblematic of early 1960's masculinity. He is an advertising genius who demonstrates his professional success through material possessions: the best car, a well-tailored suit, and the perfect family. Yet underneath their different exteriors, the two characters are linked by a fundamental similarity: both are fakes. Each has reinvented themselves, created a new name and new identity, in order to hide a past of which they feel ashamed. Both characters come to New York City to succeed based on their own

merit after living in conditions of extreme poverty, and have had to make questionable moral decisions in order to escape those circumstances. As outsiders, both have had to teach themselves the rules of the culture they wish to adopt. Don Draper and Holly Golightly succeed in New York by learning the rules of upper-crust society better than the people born into it, which gives them a fluency and fluidity with these rules. They are able to predict what other people want better than they can themselves, and are able to create desires in others where none existed. Both figures use the power of the surface to entrance.

Holly does not work alone to create the figure she later becomes. She is first discovered and trained as an actress in Hollywood by O.J. Berman, who admires her looks but hates her accent: “she opens her mouth and you don’t know if she’s a hillbilly or an Okie or what.”² Taking a roundabout route, he teaches her how to acquire the desired “American” accent: “How we did it finally, we gave her French lessons: after she could imitate French, it wasn’t so long she could imitate English.”³ Holly becomes herself by faking: in her training as an actress, she discovers how to quickly switch parts with a change of costume, and how to perform an imitation effectively enough that the seams between performance and reality are hidden.

In “Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions,” Judith Butler theorizes gender and subjectivity as performative in nature. Holly Golightly and Don Draper push the enactment of their assigned gender roles to the point of theatre. Through their performances of their highly gendered roles, both figures come to assume the persona of the characters they adopt. To a limited extent, they are able to circumvent Butler’s claim that one does not choose the role one performs, and yet ultimately, both characters are held by others to the “performances” in the roles they play: Holly is arrested for her visits to Sally Tomato and Don Draper is caught out in his extramarital affairs. Butler uses the example of drag as a subversion of gender norms, and as a way to understand the performative aspects present in all demonstrations of gender. For Butler, “drage is an example that is meant to establish that ‘reality’ is not as fixed as we assume it to be.”⁴ We can understand Holly Golightly through this lens; by pushing the boundaries of what is “real” in terms of identity, she forces us to realize the extent to which all subjectivity is invented or constructed socially. For Holly Golightly and Don Draper, life is a drag performance: they are caricatures of the ideals that their respective eras represent. Exaggerated to the extreme, these characters demonstrate the absurd restrictions of their respective societal norms.

Butler uses a quote on Greta Garbo to introduce her essay, modeling Garbo’s acting as a type of drag performance. Garbo, one of the most celebrated actors of the silent film period, was known for the expressiveness of her elegant and formidable face, the shape of which has been imitated by many drag queens. A quotation from Parker Tyler in Butler’s article celebrates the artificiality of Garbo’s performane: “how resplendent seems the art of acting! It is all impersonation, whether the sex underneath is true or not.”⁵ Garbo figures here as the ultimate female impersonator, one who through exaggeration and theatricality comes to represent an ideal of femininity that is inconsistent with reality, yet adored by thousands, including Holly Golightly. Holly picks

Garbo as one of her ideal mates, boldly telling the narrator, “if I were free to chose from everybody alive, just snap my fingers and say come here you [...] I’d settle for Garbo any day.”⁶ Garbo figures as both an ideal to be emulated and a potential sexual partner for Holly, who in turn plays a similar role for both the narrator and Joe Bell, the bartender. Both men describe a desire for Holly that is not wholly sexual or romantic, and yet encompasses a yearning and desire for her being. Holly’s sexuality functions as a suggestion, a performative hint, rather than an action. In her presence, people become invigorated and aroused – more interesting versions of their everyday selves. In this way, she invites others to partake in her performance through imagination, and many characters fall under her spell. Though her persona hinges strongly on her sexual appeal, this does not constitute all of Holly’s charm. When Holly tells the narrator that she has slept with only eleven men in her life, we are inclined to believe her, and yet her aura is consistently sexual. She resists possession in all its forms, and it is because she hints at sex but is not sexually “possessed” by Joe or the narrator that Holly retains her power over them. You keep them a stranger, a stranger who’s a friend.”⁷ Holly encompasses aspects of the known and the unknown; even for her friends, she remains a mystery.

Rather than being a simple “faker,” Holly becomes the figure she creates through her actions. The truth of her being is constituted by the role she takes up. Butler insists that one cannot simply invent one’s gender, that performance must have some relation to an inner cause. She uses the theme of the skin as semiotic surface demonstrating the way in which the surface is seen to represent a certain coherent depth in an individual:

Acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core of substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause.⁸

The “play of signifying absences” goes a long way to explain Holly’s character: as readers, we are aware from the beginning that she is not completely truthful or honest. Yet it is through the gaps in her stories, or the things she refuses to speak about that we gain a sense of the self under the mask. The painful history of her childhood, only partially explained by Doc’s arrival, makes up one of the biggest gaps in her persona which remains unknown throughout the story.

Butler’s theory of the performativity of gender is particularly resonant within the context of *Mad Men*. The show centers on Don and Betty Draper, the perfect American couple of the early 1960’s; the visual language of the show does much to signify their gender-differentiated relationship. Betty is blonde, immaculately dressed, tasteful yet glamorous: her wardrobe represents her function as wife and mother and speaks to the psychological control her husband has over her. Don is dark and strong, with his constant five o’clock shadow hinting at the masculine power barely constrained by his well-fitting suit. Don Draper lives under a name stolen from a fellow Korean War soldier, and the identity he created to go with this name is his own pure invention. The secrecy of his

“real” self is central to this appeal to men and women. Through visual and verbal hints, we see the strain on both Betty and Don of constantly keeping up their performances: yet when the costume slips, there is no true self revealed underneath. We see only layers of emotional restraint and concealed desires. Episode 11 of the third season of *Mad Men*, set on Halloween, ends with a powerful reminder of Don’s hidden self. Betty and Don knock on a neighbour’s door with their trick-or-treating children. “Look at this,” the neighbor says to the children. “We’ve got a gypsy and a hobo.” Glancing up at Don he asks, “And who are you supposed to be?” Constantly masked, Don is unable to justify the character he plays.

As an advertiser, Don inhabits the dichotomy of both creating the desires that advertising is meant to suggest, and attempting to fulfill these desires in his own life. Like Holly, his position is written on the liminal ground of his body: he follows trends, living by the rules of society, and works in advance of them, creating what others will soon want. Because they have learned all they know about upper-class culture from the advertisements of America, Holly and Don comport themselves as living advertisements: signaling at glamour and a depth that may or may not be there. In Don Draper’s life, the lines between advertising and reality are blurred: in the eighth episode of the second season, he is attempting to land an account with the Heineken company, promoting the beer as an alternative to wine with meals. Without knowing this, Betty serves the beer at a dinner party the couple hosts for the executives of Don’s company who exclaim to Betty, “Don said you were the perfect market, and you were.” Don later admits to regularly using their daily life in his advertising: he uses the material signals of his existence to create envy and desire in others. While Don Draper inhabits the ideal of 1960s masculinity, Holly works by playing on certain assumptions of what it is to be feminine in America during the war. She uses male assumptions about women to escape responsibility and to earn money. As a type of escort, she earns her living through “cab fares” and “powder-room change;” the services she provides in exchange are not made explicit. From her own tabulation of having slept with eleven men, we can assume that many of the men she dates do not receive sex from Holly, yet as the opening scene in the stairway suggests, many may expect it from her. When the surface does not coincide with the reality of the event, Holly is charged with ‘false advertising.’ Like Don’s advertisements, Holly’s glimmering and constantly shifting material exterior signals no more than the creation of need in others.

Holly evokes sentiment in her admirers through advertising techniques. The narrator’s first encounter with Holly comes through her calling card, a type of advertisement she had made at Tiffany’s. The “curious [...] rather Cartier-formal” card is embossed with the lines “Miss Holiday Golightly, Travelling.”⁹ The narrator says “it nagged me like a tune” – Holly’s jingle works.¹⁰ Yet every part of the card is a fabrication – her name is false and the card is outside her apartment. This is one of the possibilities opened by New York’s free lifestyle – one comes here to remake oneself, to become the person one has dreamed of being. Holly gives the narrator a new name and, thus, the chance for him to remake himself in a new identity. His confidence as a writer seems to grow through contact with Holly, and her constant reinventions: in her presence, the narrator is transformed. After one exhilarating afternoon together they steal

masks from a Woolworth's, then run out to "make it more dramatic."¹¹ Tellingly, the paragraph ends with the narrator revealing that the pair "wore the masks all the way home."¹² Holly's relationship to the narrator depends on her ability to conceal herself beneath a series of masks, rapidly changing her identity.

In "From Cities of Things to Cities of Signs," Paul Geyh sees the late capitalistic "city of signs" as a move away from the realm of things – actual material objects – to a consumption of surfaces inscribed with semiotic meaning.¹³ As in Geyh's essay, things are consumed in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* primarily for what they signify, and only later for their actual value. Holly uses objects and style to portray an idea of who she is: an obscure brand of cigarettes (Picayunes) and a certain style of clothing. On Doc's farm, Holly learned about big-city culture from glossy magazines. In Doc's view, this is what I incited Holly to walk away from the farm: "we must've had a hunnered dollars worth of magazines come into that house. As me, that's what done it. Looking at showoff pictures. Reading dreams."¹⁴ Through the "dreams" of advertisements and gossip columns Holly learns what is fashionable in the city, and what people want. As part of her later "research," Holly learns about baseball and horse racing, quipping to the narrator, "there's so few things men can talk about. If a man doesn't like baseball, then he must like horses, and if he doesn't like either of them, well, I'm in trouble anyway: he doesn't like girls."¹⁵ Capoted then contrasts Jose, Holly's Brazilian lover, with Holly, another foreigner to New York: "Like most of us in a foreign country, he was incapable of placing people, selecting a frame for their picture, as he would be at home; therefore all Americans had to be judged in a pretty equal light."¹⁶ Jose's inability to gauge the foreign scene is contrasted with Holly's fluency in assessing and reading people for her own gain. She is excellent at "selecting the frame" in which to place others, and even at creating the picture in which they are sketched. She chooses her marks carefully, and then proceeds to create an imaginative world around them.

Geyh's essay details the shift in advertising in the mid-twentieth century from marketing the product in question to marketing to the desires of the consumer. Holly exemplifies this ability to first identify desires in others and then to create them. For Holly, this is an effective economic model, because she is able to change herself to fit the desires of others and then she is able to raise her price when she stimulates the desire for another transformation of herself. The narrator's description of Holly shows how well she has advertised herself: she seems to belong on the shelf of a grocery store, with her "breakfast-cereal air of health" and her "soap and lemon cleanness."¹⁷ Holly is described as "glimmering like a shampoo advertisement" despite not having slept all night.¹⁸ The figure she cuts is not common; she is a rarified product, which makes her all the more valuable. For the male collectors of the novel, Holly represents a rare jewel to be possessed. Yet by a process of continual reinvention, she resists belonging to anyone.

What both Judith Butler's and Paula Geyh's articles help to convey is the sense in which Holly Golightly and Don Draper are not unique in their self-creation. While they are exceptional in the deliberateness with which they approach self-creation, a closer examination details the ways in which each of us creates a role to play. By performing this role, we become the character we have decided to be. The element of "fakery" in this

is mitigated by the process through which we come to inhabit our subjectivity. Here lies the distinction between Don Draper and Holly Golightly: at this point in the continuing television series, Don has yet to experience a moment of authenticity that affirms his transformation from poverty to the excess of wealth he inhabits. His mask is an imperfect fit; he is unable to fully live his role. For Holly Golightly, however, ongoing transformation brings joy and the ability to live freely. “Be anything but a coward, a pretender, an emotional crook, a whore. I’d rather have cancer than a dishonest heart,” Holly says.¹⁹ Coming from a woman who could be seen to belong to each of the categories above; the statement is strange. Yet it is linked to Berman’s statement near the beginning of the novella – that Holly is a “real phony” – and to her own statement that she can learn to love anybody.²⁰ Although she’s faking, she sees it as genuine, for she can come to inhabit the role she created. One of the most honest moments in the novella comes when Holly rejects Doc’s wish for her to return to the farm: “I’m not fourteen anymore and I’m not Lulamae.”²¹ Her transformation into her new role is complete.

Notes

¹Truman Capote. *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1958), 32.

²*Ibid.*, 33

³Capote, 34.

⁴Judith Butler. “Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions” *The Judith Butler Reader*. Ed. Sara Salih (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 101.

⁵*Ibid.*, 103.

⁶Capote, 77.

⁷*Ibid.*, 14

⁸Butler, 110.

⁹Capote, 16.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 16.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 53

¹²*Ibid.*, 53

¹³Paula Geyh. “From Cities of Things to Cities of Signs: Urban Spaces and Urban Subjects in *Sister Carrie* and *Manhattan Transfer*” *Twentieth Century Literature*. 52.4 (Winter 2006) 413.

¹⁴Capote, 65.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 77.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 32.

²¹*Ibid.*, 69.