

- 1) Conduct a semiotic analysis of the text, employing the following terms: sign, signifier, signified, referent, denotation and/or connotation, syntagm and/or paradigm.

“Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” is the pilot episode for *Mad Men*, a show that premieres on the cable channel AMC. Written in today’s society, it offers a fresh view of the advertising agencies in the 1960s and its sexist, drinking-induced haze of behavior of the advertising agencies. On the cusp of the “American Dream” the main character in the episode, Don Draper, must convince the fictional tobacco company Lucky Strikes to continue advertising with Sterling Cooper, the advertisement agency, in the face of the new health studies that suggest cigarettes cause cancer. Before solid scientific evidence against smoking prevailed, the advertising companies could basically say what they wanted about cigarettes to sell them, even advertising one brand as being a “healthy cigarette.” But Don is on the beginning of the health backlash and must impress his clients with a new way of advertising their deadly product, an issue that eludes him throughout the episode. The cigarette, the main sign of the first episode, is shown in many ways. The signifier is first seen in the title sequence as a white stick held in the hands of an otherwise completely blacked out cartoon animation, implying that this item is central to the character because it is the only item that is seen on the animation. Don is almost always seen smoking an actual cigarette, whether at a restaurant, in his office, or in times of stress when his work haunts him. But the idea of a cigarette isn’t just signified by the actual cigarette – it is also the Lucky Strike box that haunts Don on his desk, or being smoked in the drawing produced for the advertising pitch. The sign isn’t just limited to Don’s character either – almost all of the men in the office also smoke, and the smoking isn’t limited to one gender, as the women secretaries in the office also smoke, typing or

changing phone lines with one hand and a cigarette in another. In a pre-cancer scare world, smoking is compatible with almost every activity.

The sign is made up of this signifier, the cigarettes as they appear in the hands of the workers of the advertisement agency, and the cigarette boxes that are assumed to be Lucky Strikes, and the signified, the concept of cigarettes and smoking. But this is only the denotative, or the most literal meaning of the signs that are in this episode of *Mad Men*. As Seiter discusses in her essay, the connotative meaning of a sign is the core of the ideology because it is a particular viewpoint looked at through a particular set of lenses. (pg 39) While the denotative meaning of the cigarette never changes – it is always an object made of tobacco that can be lit on fire and the smoke inhaled – the connotative meaning of the cigarette and its signifiers are fluid throughout the episode, depending on the context. In the very beginning of the episode, Don has a talk with a black man working in a restaurant who tells him that smoking cigarettes is a routine that reminds him of yesterdays. In other parts of the episode, smoking is paired with drinking, an act that signals leisurely enjoyment or relaxation. Toward the end of the episode, Don and his advertising crew meet with the head executives of Lucky Strike, the brand of cigarettes prevalent throughout the show. Cigarettes have been associated with death because of a “radical” new health study published in Reader’s Digest. Don’s job is essentially to spin the previous connotative meanings of the signs he is selling into ones that the public craves, whether they are cigarettes or shaving cream or a new car. Throughout this episode, the idea of cigarettes and what they mean to each character is fluid and changes radically from death, to success, or to nostalgia. Don’s job depends on the success of him changing the connotation to cigarettes from one of fear to

one of enjoyment. This sign remains a staple to the storyline, a constant companion to Don but also his biggest kryptonite.

The choice of cigarettes as the sign is also an important decision. In the paradigm of controversial objects that can cause death, alcohol might have easily fit into the series as well, and is often paired with the actual cigarettes. Both, when paired together, signify a lavish, leisurely lifestyle where office hours are equivalent to cocktail hour. But alcohol, although it can be deadly, wasn't quite as controversial in the 1960s and wasn't as widely addictive as cigarettes are thought to be. The choice of tobacco as their "drug of choice" to focus on makes sense not only in the context of the episode, but also throughout the seasons, as Don's agency comes back into combat with the health issues over and over again, resulting in a showdown that threatens the business of the advertising agency. While many other objects in the paradigm could have been used, such as alcohol or chewing tobacco, cigarettes have a rooted history when dealing with pushback from advocacy groups and have the allure of appearing sexy and "grownup." The use of the cigarette in the pilot episode of *Mad Men* not only is used to show the stress of the advertising business, the leisurely lifestyle of the men on the top, but is also out of place to the viewers today, as it is done frequently and without regard to health, and is used graciously by any and all characters in the first episode.