

Crime and Punishment: Greed, Pride and Guilt in *Breaking Bad*

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Abstract

Although *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013) is one of the most critically acclaimed TV Series of the last decade, it has been the subject of little academic research. This paper aims to figure out the motivations fueling Walter White's behavior, one of the most compelling characters in contemporary popular culture.

The discovery of Walter White's cancer serves as a catalyst (a particularly appropriate chemical term) for him to unveil his true 'inner self'. The serious nature of his disease, the associated medical costs, and his feeling of failure as both a father/husband and in the professional sphere, are established as the driving force behind his infamous behavior from the very start of the series. However, beyond the strategies that underlie the initial sympathy that every viewer feels for this 'ordinary American guy', *Breaking Bad* divulges other keys that allow us to understand the transformation from 'Mr Chips into Scarface', following the premise described by *Breaking Bad*'s creator, Vince Gilligan.

As we will explore, the progressive moral and criminal decline of Walter White is spurred on by the contradictory tension between two radical emotions that become 'rationalized' in order to justify his actions, which become increasingly less defensible: an increasing pride, and the guilt that fades as the narrative unfolds. In summary, we will analyze the moral and narrative mechanisms that hasten Walter White's self-destruction once he became aware that he was facing the end of his own life.

Key Words: *Breaking Bad*, Walter White, TV series, character arc, moral disease, emotions.

1. Introduction

When consciously coming face to face with what is to be the end of one's life, it can be said that there is a universal need – reinforced by Judeo-Christian tradition – to repent and plea for forgiveness for the errors one has committed, and for the harm caused to others. Films and Literature are full of characters who, like Tolstói's Ivan Ilitch, feel the urgent need to amend for the errors of a lifetime when confronted by their death.

This is also the starting point of *Breaking Bad*: Walter White receives the news that he is suffering from terminal cancer and as is often the case, the proximity of death forces this character to take stock of his life and instills in him the need to

follow a different path. But the path that Walter chooses is somewhat peculiar in that it involves a radical inversion of the aforementioned values: pride and a suppression of the feeling of guilt replace the need to repent and that of forgiveness.

Under this premise, which will be the object of our analysis, *Breaking Bad* sets out on a descent along the road to hell. A journey full of errors, absurdity and failure, which nevertheless does not appear to be able to compete with the subjective pleasure that Walter takes from the sensation of power and of the liberation from any moral restrictions.

2. Greed: Moral Choices in a Land of Plenty

To some extent, the most recently acclaimed American fictional series offers a critical reflection on the identity of The United States of America. If *Deadwood*, for example, offers a revisionist view of the gestation of a nation in the format of a Western,¹ *The Wire* closed the circle by condemning the social and political decomposition that appears to be beyond redemption.² In this climate of deconstruction series like *Breaking Bad* or *Mad Men* develop the tale of the rise and fall of individuals who fall victim to their own decisions, but whose moral decline is rooted in the chimera of culturally accepted personal achievement.

As analyzed by Lisan Van Dorp, series like *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men* or *Boardwalk Empire* coincide in that they revolve around a main character who embodies the perversions drawn from the emphasis on the ideal of success that is rooted in the myth of the ‘American Dream.’³ For her, Walter White – like Don Draper or ‘Nucky’ Thompson – respects the narrative of the rise in society of the *self-made man* in its cynical or disillusioned state, as they break with the moral restraints associated with such an archetype. Thus, we find ourselves confronted with characters who are totally dedicated to their work, who sacrifice themselves in the search for professional excellence and who demonstrate an overwhelming will to satisfy the material needs of their family. Yet, at the same time they are prepared to use illegal and immoral means to reach their objectives, that embody the absolute ideal of success, and as such, the fulfillment of a worthwhile life.

Walter White to some extent represents the living image of failure.⁴ Frustration and misfortune appear to have accompanied him for decades: his son was born with cerebral palsy; he was left out of the undeniable professional success of his two initial partners; he has two jobs both well below his capacities; and moreover, he can’t even ensure the financial stability of his family now that lung cancer is threatening to take his life away from him.

This illness acts as a catalyst (‘I am awake!’ he yells in the pilot episode) and precipitates a brutal transformation that, as Gilligan states, constitutes the core of the series.⁵ Walter sets out to become master of his destiny, beginning with the need to prosper, which in keeping with the myth, is within the reach of each and every one of us. As such, Walter’s greed acts as a pretext – basing its moral justification, as we shall see, in his pathological pride and a sense of guilt that is ever more tenuous – on

which a deeper transformation of his character occurs.⁶ *Cooking* methamphetamine allows him in the first instance to earn ‘easy money’ (1.1.) but also, it allows him to demonstrate his professional capacity – finally he can show that he is the best at something – and this becomes a metaphor of his personal evolution: ‘Chemistry is the study of matter, but I prefer to see as the study of change.’ (1.1.)

Beyond this need, the tortuous but lucrative drug trade becomes addictive to Walter, even when his cancer remits significantly and, as such, his life is no longer in immediate danger. Walter always finds a reason to continue despite the enormous toll that he must pay: in the eyes of the spectator, a dehumanization derived from his progressive loss of moral scruples; in his own eyes, the constant distancing of that he most loves – or at least this is what he says – and that he tries to protect with a tight knit and unsustainable web of lies, his family. Here the true irony of the series crystallizes: it is precisely the initial zeal of Walter to amass a fortune for the good of his family that unleashes the domestic hell and the eventual rupture of the family unit.⁷ Moreover, Walter not only reaches the point that Skyler detests him (to the point of wishing him dead, as seen in chapter 5.4) but he also gets her caught up in and perverted by his evil trajectory.⁸

The destructive spiral in which Walter White has entered can only be understood in the light of the dark gratification that White/Heisenberg receives in exchange. A compensation related to the emotional restitution of his long hurt pride.

3. Pride and the family alibi

Although the drive to earn money that will serve for the good of the family is a genuine objective in the initial chapters of the series, it is soon converted into a mere excuse. The leaning towards the world of drugs and the reprehensible actions that this entails are justified by Walter with this mantra: the need to provide for the family. Walter, already a master of self-deception, is occasionally supported by Skyler⁹ (3.9.) and by the guiding influence of Gus Fring, who helps to clarify any doubt or remorse (3.5.):

Walter White: I have made a series of very bad decisions and I cannot make another one.

Gus Fring: Why did you make these decisions?

Walter White: For the good of my family.

Gus Fring: Then they weren’t bad decisions. What does a man do, Walter? A man provides for his family.

In reality, the exaggerated accumulation of Money is consistent with Walter’s pride, which led him to reject the charity and to seek recognition. The first season emphasizes the former. In addition to rejecting the economic aid offered by his in-laws to pay for his treatment (1.4), his refusal to accept the succulent offer of employment that is made by his ex-partner, which would have enabled him to avoid

any illegal activity forever, is fundamental: it is here that it becomes clear that his pride is more important than his love for his family. Walter appears to follow the famous quote of George Sand to the letter: “Charity degrades those who receive it and hardens those who dispense it.”

Likewise, Walter experiences the pleasure of an ever-increasing narcissism. His virtuosity in chemistry and his intelligence earn him the reverential respect of -on occasion accompanied by fear- his rivals. From being a figure lambasted by the rest and by destiny, Walter begins to feel the pleasurable sensation of taking hold of the reins of his life, of ‘being in control,’ as he states in front of another patient that was weakened by cancer (4.8). Although money no longer becomes a need, Walter remains addicted to the business in which he can demonstrate to the rest of the world that his *artistry* is insurpassable. As Tangney and Fischer explain, ‘emotions such as shame, guilt, pride and embarrassment are founded on social relationships, in which people not only interact but evaluate and judge themselves and each other. Self-conscious emotions [such as pride] are built on reciprocal evaluation and judgment.’¹⁰ As such, the ever more pathological personality of Walter demands public recognition, he needs others to be aware of his talent. This is what finally allowed him to *be someone*.¹¹ It is sufficient to compare the scene in the pilot where he hides from his students in the car wash with the excessive reassertion when confronted with some thugs at the end of the fifth season: ‘Now: say my name! [‘Heisenberg’, says the man] You’re goddam right!!’ (5.7.)

This same pride not only marks Walter’s internal conflict but also, it is determinant as to how his relationships with the characters that surround him evolve. His relationship with Jesse wavers during the fourth season when Walter sees his leadership threatened and he begins to feel *expendable*. It is the same pride that leads him to nearly give himself away in a police murder case (the assassination of Gale), as he can’t tolerate that his genius and cooking craftsmanship is attributed to another chemist (4.5). Even Mike makes a reference to this Walter’s pathological pride, situating it as the source of all his troubles:¹²

We had a good thing, you stupid son of a bitch, we had Fring (...) You could have shut your mouth and cooked and made as much money as you would have ever needed. But no, you just had to blow it up! You and your pride and your ego, you just had to be the man! If you’d done your job, known your place, we’d all be fine right now (5.7.)

However, where the complex drive of his pride is most evident is in his relationship with his family. During the first two series the relationship with Skyler is strongly based on the other face of this pride: shame. As catalogued by Tangney and Fischer, these are ‘emotions of opposite polarity’. At the outset of the story, the Walter’s moral compass indicates how reprehensible his actions are and consistent

with the classical response to shame, he ‘tries to hide or escape from the observation or judgement’¹³ of others, in this case that of his wife and son. As it turns out, and as Gilligan admits, Walter is a genius when it comes to deceit: ‘Walt’s superpower is that of being the biggest liar in the world. There is no better liar in the world of *Breaking Bad* and the person that he is most capable of deceiving is in fact he himself.’¹⁴

However, by the end of the second season two events occur that alter Walter’s self-image: Skyler discovers his continued farces; and his cancer temporally remits. Both these facts—intertwined with the rest of the story, as is logical—provoke a new psychological twist in Walter, and as is a norm throughout the series, his pride imposes on the shame or guilt (as we will analyze in the following section). As is the emotional leitmotiv of *Breaking Bad*, Walter White rationalizes his emotions adapting them to the new scenario, and always giving preference to his pride over his feelings of guilt. The zenith of this transformation (that in the fifth season will derive into domestic psychological terror) takes place in chapter 4.6. when Skyler doubts the physical integrity of her husband, accusing him implicitly of being weak. An irate Walter responds:

You clearly don't know who you're talking to, so let me clue you in: I am not in danger, Skyler. I am the danger. A guy opens his door and gets shot, and you think that of me? No! I am the one who knocks! (4.6.)

In this sense, Kuo and Wu defined a suggestive analogy between this character and Satan in *Paradise Lost*,¹⁵ and it is clear that Walter adheres to the phrase of Milton’s Demon: ‘Better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven.’ But to reign in hell it is necessary to act with malice. Accordingly, the progressive dehumanization of the protagonist is driven by his exaggerated pride that, as the story unfolds, becomes released from all the moral constraints that are imposed by an emotion that is so human, the sense of guilt. Deprived of this sensation, Walter is converted into a remorseless man.

4. Guilt and the birth of a Superman; from Mr White to Heisenberg

As we have explained, *Breaking Bad* narrates the story of a monster that is fighting to cast off his human mask. This metamorphosis is progressive and in fact, Walter initially awakens certain compassion such that the spectator can empathize with him: during the first season, the sick Walter is the ‘identifiable suburban dad under enormous pressure.’¹⁶ The challenge of the series precisely lies in the extent to which the viewer’s interest in the luck of a character that is ever more repulsive can be maintained, and with whom the bond of a shared moral code is progressively lost. As the monster begins to take over, Walter’s pride begins to crush his moral conscience, his sense of guilt.

This is clearly evident through the bloody acts that he begins to commit. They are ever more outrageous and severe, and yet the chemistry teacher always finds a way to justify them. The first important violent act comes in the third chapter of the series, with the death of Krazy-8. On this occasion, as occurs throughout the first two seasons, all these assassinations have an air of a mere instinct for survival: kill in self defense or be killed.

The big change comes later, not by chance, once his cancer remits (2.9.) and Walter demonstrates the strength of Heisenberg's personality with that 'Stay Out of my territory' that he bellows in the hardware store (2.10.). Soon later, in chapter 2.12., Jane dies. In this case there was no physical threat to his life (as occurred in the earlier deaths) but he still refuses to help her and he is fully aware that he has left her choking to die. What is interesting in this event is the contrast in the way it affects the protagonists: while Jesse's sense of guilt becomes ever more apparent (3.7.), Walter appears to be ever more immune to the moral consequences of his actions.

During part of the series, Walter White exhibits a conscience that admits the evil in his actions, and as a consequence, he on occasions expresses a strong sense of guilt. This explains his enraged response to such good news as the remission of his illness (2.9.). Walter response is to cause himself pain (furiously smashing his knuckles in the bath) and in that moment, we sense that he cannot support the guilt of all the pain that he caused. No longer can he argue that mitigating circumstances justify what he does is for a greater good given the imminence of his death. This is the feeling that becomes explicit in 'The Fly':

'Skyler and Holly were in another room. I can hear them on the baby monitor. She was singing a lullaby. Oh, if I had just lived right up to that moment...and not one second more. That would have been perfect (...) I'm saying that I lived too long.' (3.10.)

However, as we explain, his exaggerated pride further complicates the justification of his motivations. His rules change, readapting to the new situations of the plot with a single, constant emotional aspect: that his pride overrides his guilt.¹⁷ This is the big difference with Pinkman. Jesse perceives the stain of his actions and he becomes the moral voice of the pair from when he kills Gale (3.13.). From then, the sense of guilt makes him more human and enhances his empathy with the spectator, unlike Walter who is increasingly more distanced morally from the audience. In the third season, Mr White steps up a level by running over Gus Fring's two henchmen and orchestrating the liquidation of Gale. In the fourth he puts in danger a child (poisoning Brock) and an elderly lady (the neighbor that he uses as to ensure the path is clear in 4.13.), and in the fifth, as well as terrifying Skyler, and running over and killing Mike, his reaction to the death of the child on the motorbike is very significant: projecting along with Jesse a compassion that proves to be false

when just moments later we see him happily whistling (5.6.). Walter is now a merciless and guiltless man, a superman capable of constructing his very own value system.

5. Conclusion

‘Jesse, you asked me once, If I was in the meth business or the money business. Neither. I’m in the Empire Business.’ (5.6.) Although there are still eight chapters to go in order to finalize the descent into hell of Walter White, his moral decomposition cannot be reversed. Surrender now no longer seems to be a valid option. Indeed, as spectators, we know that on the one hand, his cancer returns and Walter is on the run (thanks to the flashforward in chapter 5.1.), and on the other, that Hank has discovered the identity of the mysterious Heisenberg (the scene with which chapter 5.8 closes).

However, in accordance with the complex emotional web that we have studied in these pages, the megalomania expressed and confirmed to Jesse’s face demonstrates that Walter’s ambition and pride has no limits. Neither the family nor the pain caused, not even the millions of dollars that he has accumulated can detain him from forging onwards and upwards. In reality, only one issue remains to be clarified, to determine if Walter suffers an anagnorisis that brings him face-to-face with the unfathomable depths of his malice and of the damage that he has provoked, or whether by contrast, he will self-destruct and die writhing in the ecstasy of the most powerful drug: that of an arrogance that makes him believe that he is above any moral law.

Notes

- ¹ Robert Westerfelahaus and Celeste Lacroix, 'Waiting for the Barbarians: HBO's *Deadwood* as a Post-9/11 Ritual of Disquiet', *Southern Communication Journal* 74 (2009): 18-39. Daniel Worden, 'Neo-liberalism and the Western: HBO's *Deadwood* as National Allegory', *Canadian Review of American Studies* 39 (2009): 221-246.
- ² Marsha Kinder, 'Re-wiring Baltimore: The emotive power of systemic, seriality, and the City', *Film Quarterly*, 62 (2008-09): 50-57. Blake D. Ethridge, 'Baltimore on *The Wire*: the tragic moralism of David Simon,' in *It's not TV. Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*, eds. Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott and Cara Louis Buckley (New York, Routledge, 2008), 152-164.
- ³ Lisa Van Dorp, "The Dramatization and Criticism of the Ideal of Success in American Society on American Television: A Case Study of the Representation of Success" in *Mad Men, Breaking Bad and Boardwalk Empire*, MA Thesis, (Utrecht University, 2011), 70-72.
- ⁴ This idea is very clearly reinforced visually through the dull form of dressing or the fact that he drives an exceedingly unappealing car: a Pontiac Aztec, considered by *The Daily Telegraph* in 2008 as the top of the list of the 100 most ugly cars in history.
- ⁵ Emmanuel Burdeau, 'En las entrañas de *Breaking Bad*', *So Film* 01 (2013): 52
- ⁶ Again reflected in his appearance: he adopts a more aggressive look (that includes sunglasses and a shaved head), he assumes the identity of Heisenberg (a tribute to the celebrated German Physicist who, among others activities, led the Nazi's attempts to build an atomic bomb); and finally, he changes his Pontiac for a much flashier and stunning sports car.
- ⁷ Ironically this effect is again evident in Walter's absence at such an important and symbolic moment as the birth of his daughter (2.12), which he misses as he has to make an important drug delivery that is crucial to be able to take a step upwards in the business. Another unexpected turn of events in this underworld will prevent him later from attending Walter Junior's birthday (4.10) and, as anticipated in the flashforward in chapter 5.1., he will also celebrate his 52 birthday alone.
- ⁸ Walter is kicked out of his home and although he later manages to return, he watches as his children abandon the family home to move into that of their aunt and uncle. This movement of separation-reuniting-separation is also evident in his relationship with Skyler: she breaks up with him (and betrays him) when she discovers his dealings, and later they get back together to *launder* his money, efficiently removing any trace of its origins in the drug business, and finally, she again abandons him, both due to the danger and the threat of death that Walter's presence implies to them, as well as out of the fear and horror that she feels when she discovers the monster that her husband has become.
- ⁹ Skyler also justifies her foray into the criminal world by using the same justification as Walter: to defend the moral and physical integrity of the family. However, the sense of guilt experienced by one and the other are radically distinct.
- ¹⁰ June Price Tangney and Kurt W. Fischer, eds., *Self-Conscious Emotions. The Psychology of Shame, Guilt, Embarrassment and Pride* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995), 3-4.
- ¹¹ Again, the imprudent change of car serves as a visual reference in this sense.
- ¹² An accusation that logically, further triggers Walter's pride and causes him to act irrationally and to kill Mike.
- ¹³ Tangney and Fischer, *Self-Conscious Emotions*, 10.
- ¹⁴ Burdeau, 'En las entrañas', 52.
- ¹⁵ Michelle Kuo and Albert Wu, "'In Hell, 'We Shall Be Free'": On *Breaking Bad*', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 13th July 2012, retrieved on 5th April 2013.
<<http://lareviewofbooks.org/article.php?id=761&fulltext=1>>
- ¹⁶ Alan Sepinwall, *The Revolution was Televised: The Cops, Crooks, Slingers and Slayers Who Changed TV Drama Forever* (2012), 356-57.
- ¹⁷ This moral decline is not linear, as the more humane Walter at times struggles to break through to the surface and overthrow his other ego. In fact, there is a painful moment of weakness in chapter 4.10., when he breaks into tears before his son. This is the last time that Walter White considers any alternative to his criminal life. However, a new turn at the end of the following episode (regarding the money that Skyler gives to Beneke) forces him to again forge onwards and as is by that stage becoming the norm, his pride supersedes any other moral consideration.

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