

“I am the one who knocks!”: What It Means to Be a Man in *Breaking Bad*.

By

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in Film and Media Studies and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Date Defended: August 18, 2014

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Date approved: October 30, 2014

Abstract

Breaking Bad (AMC, 2008-2013) dramatizes the rise and fall of Walter White, a mild-mannered high school chemistry teacher who, through a series of misfortunes and freak opportunities, is transformed into a notorious, brutal drug kingpin -- a trajectory described as "Mr. Chips" to "Scarface." I contextualize and conduct a textual analysis of this acclaimed television series as a case study that demonstrates the increasingly complex construction of masculine identity in contemporary television. This study examines the reception of specific characters among critics and audiences, as well as investigates the ways in which the setting and depiction of ethnicities influence representations of masculinity. Calling for attention to the apparent lack in masculinity studies on television, the complex male representation in *Breaking Bad* suggests that men are not merely experiencing a crisis of their masculinity in contemporary society, but demonstrates that there is a problem with uniform white, hetero-normative representation of masculinity on TV.

Acknowledgements

My sincere gratitude goes to my thesis advisor, Dr. John C. Tibbetts, for his advice and encouragement throughout my thesis writing process. In addition, I thank my committee members – Dr. Germaine Haleboua and Dr. Ron Wilson – for their input and enthusiasm. I would also like to thank Karla Conrad, Senior Administrative Associate and Graduate Secretary, for all of her help, and Dr. Bärbel Göbel-Stolz for introducing me to *Breaking Bad*.

This thesis would not have been possible without the support of my loved ones. I thank my family, especially my mother Heike Wöll, my brother Christian Wöll, and my father-in-law Dr. James Wille, for their love and encouragement throughout my life. In particular, I thank my mother-in-law, Diana Wille, for her invaluable support. I owe a special debt of gratitude to my husband and best friend, Joshua Wille, for his unyielding belief in me. He supported me throughout the entire process of writing my thesis, and I will be forever grateful for his love and understanding.

Finally, this thesis is dedicated to my father, Klaus Wöll, who always encouraged me to go after my dreams. He will be greatly missed.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

A serial killer, an advertising agent, a politician, a chemistry teacher, and a deputy U.S. Marshall walk into a bar What could be the beginning of a joke in fact resembles the current American television landscape. Series like *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006-2013), *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-), *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013), *Justified* (FX, 2010-), and *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-) alike focus on dysfunctional, white, male American characters. These are flawed men who lead morally conflicted secret lives and struggle in their relationships with women as well as in their traditional roles as father figures.

When I first came to the United States in 2011 as a graduate student, I was not familiar with these male-centered dramas and particularly *Breaking Bad*. Although shows like *The Sopranos* and *Dexter* have been quite popular in the US, they are not so widely known and celebrated in Germany. It was through a colleague in my film department that I was introduced to the series. However, I began watching *Breaking Bad* when it was in its third season and in one episode, “Más,” drug kingpin Gustavo Fring gives the series protagonist Walter White a tour of his secret meth super lab and offers him a very lucrative job as head cook for his drug operation. Although Walt is impressed by the facility and intrigued by the job offer, he refuses it out of fear that a continued involvement in the drug business would sooner or later cost him his family. “What does a man do, Walter?,” Gus retorts, “A man provides. When you have children, you will always have family. They will always be your priority, your responsibility. And a man, a man provides. And he does it even when he’s not appreciated, or respected, or even loved. He simply bears up and he does it. Because he’s a man.”

It became clear to me that the question of what it means to be a man lies at the very heart of *Breaking Bad*, and part of the appeal of the series is its depiction of various characters’

conflicting viewpoints of what a man should be like. At that time, what fascinated me most was not so much Walt's masculine alter ego, Heisenberg, but the fact that he had a completely different characterization at the beginning of the series. I decided to watch the series from the beginning in order to appreciate Walt's dramatic transformation.

Breaking Bad concentrates on the life of Walter White, an unassertive and overqualified high school chemistry teacher. Upon his fiftieth birthday, Walt learns that he has terminal lung cancer and decides the only way to ensure that his family has financial security in a short period of time is by creating and selling crystal meth. By formulating a nearly "pure" meth product, Walt inadvertently disrupts the local drug market and finds himself caught in the crossfire between ruthless criminals and the relentless US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). No longer bound by social and economic restrictions, Walt seizes the opportunity to transform himself into Heisenberg, his masculine alter ego, in spite of the dangerous consequences it has on him and his family.

Television scholar Jason Mittell (2012-2013) argues that a character's shifting morality, attitudes, and sense of self are too complex for serial television but would be more suited to stand-alone narrative forms like film and literature. However, we do see these characteristics in contemporary male-centered television dramas. In particular, *Breaking Bad* demonstrates that male characters on television are no longer stable and fixed, but can undergo complex character developments. *Breaking Bad* "convincingly transform[s] a milquetoast into a monster or, as [series creator Vince] Gilligan often put it, 'Mr. Chips into Scarface'" (Martin 2013, 267). Perhaps channeling Tyler Durden's mantra uttered during the self-destructive chemical burning scene in film *Fight Club* (1999), Walt's passionate description of chemistry as the "study of change," about "growth, then decay, then transformation" ("Pilot") in many ways foreshadows

his own metamorphosis. He begins his journey as a character whose masculinity is diminished among his peers, but during the course of the series he decimates those relationships and reforms his reputation with a new identity. Faced with his own mortality, Walt essentially decides to rewrite his headstone and reclaim his masculinity before he dies, but his cancer leaves him in a state of peril where his health and family life slowly come to an end while his newfound criminal life thrives. Walt becomes a man caught between parallel worlds: he is a law-abiding citizen and a drug kingpin, a negligent father and a rigorous criminal mentor, an idealistic husband and a pragmatic murderer. He is a man becoming more alive while condemned to die.

My interest in Walt's masculine character journey in *Breaking Bad* compelled me to explore additional male-centered dramas with this new perspective. I soon found parallels among these dramas because their male anti-heroes stimulate a discourse on manhood and explore both traditional and contrary gender behavior around roles as fathers, husbands, businessmen, law enforcers, or criminals. *Breaking Bad* stands apart from other male-centered dramas because Walt does not appear initially as a fully formed masculine character working in a dangerous or macabre career. Whereas *Justified*'s lawman Raylan Givens grew up looking at his future grave that his criminal father had already marked for him, and *Dexter* hinges on a character who is morbidly attracted to death, both in his job as a blood-spatter analyst and secret life as a serial killer, *Breaking Bad*'s Walt begins as just your average high school chemistry teacher.

Walt's struggle to become more masculine is the central issue of *Breaking Bad* and he exemplifies a character that gains most of his agency through his amassment of wealth. He breaks away from his prescribed role as a cookie-cutter WASP homemaker in the middle class and moves defiantly between upper, middle, and lower classes in his relentless pursuit of money, confounding his peers in the drug business who are ethnically not white and come from lower

economic classes. And unlike his philanthropic billionaire friends Elliot and Gretchen, Walt does not become rich in a legal trade but in violent crime. In these ways, Walt truly becomes an individual but is ultimately alone.

Critical Background

Over television's brief history, television scholars have gathered extensive research on gender representations on the small screen. However, when looking at representations of gender on popular television, Rebecca Feasey (2008) notes that most works focus on representations and constructions of femininity and provide insights into women's roles on television, while leaving representations of men and masculinity on the small screen comparatively untheorized (1). Additionally, "there are no departments, programs, or jobs created exclusively for scholars of masculinity" (Adams and Savran 2002, 1). According to Feasey (2008), the main reason for this increased scholarly focus on representations of femininity on TV is due in part to television programming being marketed to female consumers during the early 1950s, and in part because of the interests of the second-wave feminist movement in the late 1970s (2). Although these factors may have certainly influenced women studies, I argue that it was mainly women's underrepresentation on television that sparked scholarly work on feminine television representations (see D'Acci 2004; Johnson 2007). Television and media scholar Amanda Lotz (2006) explains that prior to the late 1990's, there was a historical lack of female centered dramas. She claims that female characters were either confined to situation comedies (e.g. *I Love Lucy*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Roseanne*) or only appeared as individual characters in male-dominated genres (e.g. Captain Janeway in *Star Trek: Voyager*) (2). According to Lotz, it was not until the 1980s when a noticeable shift in female representations on television occurred (3). Beginning with *Cagney and Lacey* (1982), shows that featured female leads became increasingly

popular and reached a high point in the late 1990s and early 2000s with series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB, 1997-2001), *Ally McBeal* (FOX, 1997-2002), and *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004) among others. Feminist television scholars especially explored representations of these female characters and analyzed their abilities within a broader social setting (see Dow 1996; Projansky and Vande Berg 2000; Philips 2000; and Creeber 2001).

Feasey argues that this preoccupation with femininity reaffirmed masculinity as unwavering and permanent, and thus not worthy of further inquiry (2). Although Amanda Lotz admits in her latest work *Cable Guys* (2014) that male characters have not experienced the same limitations as female characters on television, she argues that certain masculine ideals pervade in television history and have been consistently idealized (8). As a result, certain male behaviors, traits, and beliefs have been supported while others have been denigrated (9). I claim that male-centered dramas in general, and *Breaking Bad* in particular, introduce male characters that probe the complexity of contemporary masculinity and explore these characters' feelings and relationships with other characters, thus negotiating gender roles. Examining masculine representations on television is essential because contemporary male-centered dramas explore conflicts between feminist approaches to fatherhood and marriage, and traditional constructions of masculine identity that highlight male roles as providers.

Therefore, the rise of male-centered dramas on contemporary American television opens up a discourse on the portrayal of masculinity on TV. Beginning with *The Sopranos* (HBO 1999-2007), shows like *The Shield* (FX 2002-2008), *Rescue Me* (FX 2004-2011), *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006-2013), *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007), *Sons of Anarchy* (FX 2008-), *Hung* (HBO 2009-2011), *Justified* (FX, 2010-), *The Walking Dead* (AMC 2010-), *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO 2010-), and *True Detective* (HBO 2014-) redefine male representation on television. Characters like Tony

Soprano, Dexter Morgan, Vic Mackey, Tommy Gavin, or Raylan Givens are complex men who are caught between multiple roles: heroes and villains, loving fathers and struggling husbands, both exceptional and ruthless in their job. These series take a turn towards more traditional constructions of masculine identity and affirm men's role as provider, but they also explore the limitations and struggles that arise from this construct. Amanda Lotz (2014) argues in a recent *Salon* article:

The absence of shows that attend to both the home and work lives of male protagonists prior to 'The Sopranos,' and the speed by which the male-centered serial became an identifiable subgenre are astounding. Though men have always been prevalent on television and commonly characterized to have both professional and domestic roles, very few series explored stories in both spheres with near equivalent depth until the early 2000s.

Despite the growth of male-centered television dramas, the evolving construction of masculinity on television is still a neglected subject in academia. Scholars like Kenneth MacKinnon (2003) argue that feminist television theorists might be worried that analyzing images of men could draw attention away from feminist work that is still in progress (8). This might also be the reason why shows such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS 1970-77), *Murphy Brown* (CBS 1988-98), *Ally McBeal* (FOX 1997-2002), *Sex and the City* (HBO 1998-2004), and *Girls* (HBO 2012-) have drawn attention to the zeitgeist of female identity, while male-centered dramas like *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, and *The Sopranos* have not been considered as evidence for changing gender roles (Lotz 2014).

Although contemporary male-centered dramas serve, according to Lotz (2014), as case studies that expose but do not resolve the issue of how to be a husband, father, and career man in contemporary society (10), I argue that studying male-centered dramas offer challenges to previous renditions of masculinity and open up the possibility for new perspectives on its representations. Sociologist Michael Kimmel (2002) claims, "masculinity studies is a significant

outgrowth of feminist studies and an ally to its older sister in a complex and constantly shifting relationship” (ix). Media scholar Steven Craig (1992) adds, “Men’s studies is clearly the offspring of not only feminist theory, but also the social awareness brought on by the women’s movement. As a result, men’s studies is largely pro-feminist in its approach. In fact, most men’s studies research seeks to extend and expand the insights into gender relationships offered by feminist thought” (2). Therefore, an increased focus on masculinity studies and male representations on television does not imply for scholars to stop looking into female representations on television. Instead, it calls for a nuanced consideration of male characters and the way in which they are represented. I argue that to apply a textual analysis to male-centered dramas might contribute to women’s studies and illuminate changing gender roles.

Statement of Purpose

The anti-hero, or charismatic monster, has become the signature character on male-centered dramas. Dexter Morgan, Don Draper, Al Swearengen, and Rayland Givens, among others are constantly breaking rules and provoking the authorities, not just within the social context of their story world, but also through their masculine behavior. These modern anti-heroes reference previous male genres, such as western films and gangster sagas, but they also deviate from their predecessors by depicting male characters as anxious, uneasy, dysfunctional, unassertive, and flawed, yet likeable and sympathetic. This portrayal makes them deeply human and invites audiences to relate to the struggle of masculinity. Because these male-centered dramas portray masculinity as uncertain and contested, they challenge Western masculine ideals and simultaneously test their boundaries, putting their values and implications under scrutiny. However, this begs the question why we encounter so many anti-heroes on television now. Is

there a more reasoned explanation other than that cable TV can get away with these representations nowadays?

My thesis analyzes masculine representations in contemporary male-centered television dramas by using *Breaking Bad* as an exemplary text. I argue that *Breaking Bad*'s Walt/Heisenberg exemplifies what writer and journalist Brett Martin (2013) calls a “radical extension of the antihero trend that had by then become the signature of the decade’s TV” (267). *Breaking Bad* serves as a primary example of male-centered dramas and sets itself apart because of its extraordinary character study; no other contemporary series depicts such a dramatic character arc that traces a protagonist’s masculine transformation. *Breaking Bad* demonstrates an increasingly complex construction of masculine identity on television, and this study examines the reception of specific characters among critics and audiences, and explores the ways in which the setting and depiction of ethnicities influence the representation of masculinity. Calling attention to the lack in masculinity studies on television, the complex portrayal of masculinity in *Breaking Bad* suggests that men are not merely experiencing a crisis of their masculinity in contemporary society, it more accurately demonstrates that there is a problem with uniformly white, heteronormative representations of masculinity on TV. *Breaking Bad*, more than other male-centered dramas today, reveals that the expectations and struggles of male characters are more complex and should no longer be so neglected.

Review of Literature

Although there exists a substantial body of work on the representation of masculinity in film (see Grant 2001; Abott 2002; Fradley 2004; Huffer 2003; and Chopra-Grant 2006), there is relatively little scholarly research on masculine representations on contemporary television programming. Feasey (2008) argues that the “existing literature on the representation of

masculinities on television ... remains [only a] brief examination within a wider academic terrain” (4). Feasey’s statement is somewhat ironic because her textual analysis in *Masculinity and Popular Television* only provides the reader with only a general overview of applications of masculinity theory on an array of television genres. Although her work contains small case studies, it does not offer in-depth analyses. Nevertheless, Feasey’s work provided research for my own to build upon. Similarly, Steve Craig (1992) in *Men, Masculinity, and the Media* gives an overview of past studies on masculinity and its representations in media. His work offers a theoretical framework for the present study because he assembles selected essays that examine how media constructs masculinities and analyzes the ways men and their relationships have been depicted in media. Most important to my study, however, was Amanda D. Lotz’s in-depth analysis of both women studies and masculinity studies on television. Her book, *Redesigning Women: Television after the Network Era* (2006), addresses the development of feminist studies and television, and discusses the rise in programming for women. Lotz also examines how women are represented on television and concludes that although female characters are often portrayed as empowered, they still struggle between their family and careers. Through this theoretical framework, Lotz establishes the basis for a better understanding of how masculinity studies is situated within this discourse. She explores this further in her most recent work, *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinity in the 21st Century* (2014), which solely focuses on male-centered dramas. Lotz draws interesting connections between representations of male and female characters on television, and argues that men on television are also somewhat limited by certain idealized masculine traits. She claims that these male characters are conflicted between their masculine role as father and husband, and their expected role as the family’s sole provider. These

interpretations were influential in my textual analysis of male-centered dramas and *Breaking Bad* in particular.

Focusing on male-centered dramas, I also found Sue Thornham and Tony Purvis's work in *Television Drama: Theories and Identities* (2005) helpful and informative. Thornham and Purvis provide a theoretical backdrop for television drama; a genre that they argue is key to understanding contemporary narrative theories and constructions of male and female identities. In particular, their section on post-feminism, gender, and sexuality in television has been especially interesting for my study.

Additionally, Gary Edgerton's *The Essential HBO Reader* (2008) is a comprehensive work on the history and development of the premium cable channel HBO that provided my study with important background knowledge on the television industry. Similarly, Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley's essay collection *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-television Era* (2008) analyzes HBO's influence on television drama. The volume generally puts forth the argument that HBO is at the center of television studies' interests in market positioning, style and content, technology, and political economy, and thus HBO has made a great impact on the television landscape since the late 1990s. For example, in his essay "Para-television and discourses of distinction: the culture of production at HBO," Avi Santo argues that HBO's famous catchphrase "It's Not TV. It's HBO" is a marketing strategy that could explain the rise of male centered dramas following the surprising success of *The Sopranos*. Santo claims that HBO's declaration to be "non-television" also defies what television stands for, namely being feminizing, consumerist, emasculating, and massified (33). These works on HBO's development have thus informed the present study on the industrial development of male-centered dramas.

Building on this groundwork, Jason Mittell's research in *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (2011-2012) gives insightful information on shifts in television storytelling that paved the way for male-centered dramas. Mittell explores cultural practices within the television industry, technology, and viewership, and disproves the assumption that television storytelling is simplistic. Journalist Brett Martin's own work supports Mittell's argument and claims that we are currently experiencing television's third golden age. In his book *Difficult Men* (2013), Martin provides a rich understanding of the industrial perspective and creative processes of the television industry. He looks behind the scenes and collects many interviews with show runners and series creators that trace the development of male-centered dramas.

Due to the fact that *Breaking Bad* is such a recent show, there are few scholarly books and articles devoted to this male-centered drama, particularly with regard to masculinity. That said, David P. Pierson's book *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays on the Contexts, Politics, Style, and Reception of the Television Series* (2014) provides an insightful analysis of the series, especially its section that focuses on hegemonic masculinity and the male characters' anxiety and dysfunctionality. Additionally, Pierson's work delves into the representation of Latino characters and discusses the southwestern setting of the series, as well as its incorporation of Mexican and Latino culture.

I have also found several helpful non-academic sources that informed my case study of *Breaking Bad*. For example, David R. Koepsell and Robert Arp's work *Breaking Bad and Philosophy: Badder Living through Chemistry* (2012) is a collection of essays that discuss the ways the series references genres, its storytelling mode, representation of character relations, and setting. Unfortunately, that book was published before *Breaking Bad*'s conclusion, and thus is

limited in its textual analysis. Another popular work that proved to be useful was Pearson Moore's *Breaking White: An Introduction to Breaking Bad* (2012). As an unofficial companion for the series, this work offers a detailed analysis of characters and themes. Moreover, Pearson enriches his writing by measuring the scientific dramatizations in *Breaking Bad* against his background in pharmaceutical development and high-school chemistry education. Online research further inspired my work and provided me with background information of not only the characters and show creators, but also the interpretations by various television scholars, including Jason Mittell, Todd VanDerWerff, and Maureen Ryan, among others. Overall, the works on masculinity studies in television, the historical significance of HBO, and the nascent work on *Breaking Bad* provide a critical framework for the investigations explored in this study.

Methodology

Breaking Bad has already reached its narrative end, with its final episode airing on September 29, 2013. This gives me the opportunity to reflect on the series and to examine the narrative arch of Walt's development. I focus on the narrative structure of *Breaking Bad* as a character's journey from a mild mannered high school teacher to a fearsome drug lord, specifically in the context of masculine representation. It is important to note that I approach masculine television representation as a constant state of flux; nevertheless I believe that it is necessary to look at a hierarchy of different models of masculinity. Therefore, when I address masculinity and male representation in my work, I primarily refer to traditional male identities rooted in patriarchal and hegemonic masculinity.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity, as described by Robert Hanke (1992), originates within recent works in the sociology of gender, and is generally understood as a particular variety of masculinity in which women, and effeminate or homosexual men are considered

subordinate (see Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1987; and Connell 1987). In television studies, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is often expressed in predominantly male genres, such as gangster sagas, film noir, action-adventures, and westerns, which define men in relation to power, authority, aggression, and technology (Hanke 1992, 191). Therefore, both hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinity depends on a character's access to power, which is influenced by his race, class, or sexual orientation. Hanke further argues that personal ascendancy in hegemonic masculinity "is achieved not only through violence and coercion but also through a cultural process in which masculinism, the dominant ideology of patriarchy, meets with resistance and challenge" (190).

Although I will apply insights drawn from the sociology of masculinity studies, my thesis foregrounds male representation in contemporary male-centered television dramas, and thus my focus will be on television studies. I will examine representations of masculinity in *Breaking Bad* by employing textual analysis. Additionally, I will apply Julie D'Acci's (2004) "integrated approach" to representations of gender on television. Her methodology considers television content and audience reception, as well as industrial and socio-historical contexts, as connected parts in constructing representations of gender. While D'Acci's approach ensures that representations of gender are well-informed and not simply based on a TV content, she emphasizes that not every study can, or must, examine each of the four aspects in great detail (381). My work focuses particularly on *Breaking Bad*'s position of characters within the plot and its narrative structure as a whole, as well as its references to certain genres, in order to discuss the representation of masculinity. Further, I will analyze the socio-historical context of *Breaking Bad* by comparing it to other contemporary male-centered dramas and investigate the ways in which the setting and depiction of ethnicities influence representations of masculinity in the

series. In my analysis, I also address the reception of specific characters of *Breaking Bad* among critics and audiences, as well as certain aspects of *Breaking Bad*'s production background. However, I place more emphasis on *Breaking Bad*'s complex narrative structure and socio-historical context. As a result, D'Acci's approach provides a framework for my analysis of how *Breaking Bad* dismantles past representations of masculinity and exemplifies new ones.

Organization

In next chapter, I examine Walt's character as a husband and father. After providing a brief history of the development of fathers on television, I explore Walt's relationship to his biological son, Walt Jr., as well as his pupil and surrogate son, Jesse, and I argue that the representation of Walt as a father figure is crucial to the understanding of his character and his motivations. Then, I analyze Walt's marriage to Skyler, which especially conveys his transformation into a more masculine character and reflects his increasingly dominant behavior. I also address audience negativity directed toward Skyler and analyze its implications. Additionally, I examine the connection between masculinity and money in *Breaking Bad* and argue that a man's struggle to be the family provider and remain independently powerful is the main theme of the series.

In the final chapter, I focus on the politics of race and masculinity in *Breaking Bad*. Here, I analyze the Albuquerque, New Mexico setting and its importance in the overall narrative. I argue that the representation of *Breaking Bad*'s non-white characters accentuate the masculinity and superiority of its white characters. Moreover, I argue that *Breaking Bad* whitewashes the drug market and romanticizes the story of a white middle-class high school chemistry teacher turned drug kingpin. Despite this observation, I challenge the notion that *Breaking Bad* promotes white supremacy in its subtext.

CHAPTER II: BEING A FATHER IN *BREAKING BAD*

“What does it mean to be a man? No one really knows, but it makes for some damn good television” (Marcotte 2011). Our TV screens are filled with male characters that are uncertain about what “being a man” means, and thus struggle in their careers and their roles as fathers and husbands. Amanda Lotz (2014) maintains, “male characters have been central to television storytelling since the medium’s origins, which may lead some to suggest that there is considerable redundancy in the term ‘male-centered serial’” (55). I agree with Lotz that the exclusively male focus of these dramas emphasizes characterization to the degree that characters are more than simple stand-ins for general ‘dads’, ‘detectives’ or ‘criminals’ but specific individuals that shape their masculine identity throughout the series (57). Although the underlying question what it means to be a man is present in most male-centered dramas, *Breaking Bad* is unique in that it widens the thematic scope of male representation on television. Unlike other shows that focus on masculine men in macho professions such as policemen, firefighters, advertisement agents, or mafia bosses, *Breaking Bad* focuses on the transformation of a powerless father and high school teacher into a potent and feared drug kingpin. Andrew Romano (2011) claims that it is Walt’s ongoing transformation that draws viewers into the series, adding, “That’s the addiction: getting to know a person so well, through television, that when he goes bad, we can begin to comprehend something that real life simply doesn’t allow us to comprehend – how people become dangerous.”

Breaking Bad creator Vince Gilligan stresses that his series is primarily about the character of Walter White. He maintains: “I knew what the central spine of the show was going to be ... I wanted to create a show where the protagonist metamorphoses into the antagonist. Historically you haven’t seen that on TV” (Sweeney, 2014). Gilligan has stated in numerous

interviews that he sees Walt's character arc as a transformation from good to bad. Martin (2013) describes the series as "a study in empowered masculinity run horribly amok, without even the compensatory wish fulfillment granted Tony Soprano or Don Draper" (267). Unlike Tony Soprano or Don Draper, Walter White is a dying man with a limited window of time, and thus Walt's masculinity is unhinged. As a character study, *Breaking Bad* emphasizes the "how" and "why" of Walt's progression. How did he get to this point? And why did he choose this path? A stylistic feature that would later become the show's trademark is therefore to open or intercut an episode, or even an entire season, with a climactic teaser sequence that foreshadows dramatic events. The audience knows where the character is heading, and yet desperately wants to know *how* he arrives at this uncertain precarious situation. Chuck Klosterman (2011) thus argues that *Breaking Bad* diverges from other series because "*Breaking Bad* is not a situation in which the characters' morality is static or contradictory or colored by the time frame; instead, it suggests that morality is continually a personal choice." Therefore, in an interview with Andrew Romano (2011), Gilligan remarks, "Television is historically good at keeping its characters in a self-imposed stasis so that shows can go on for years or even decades. When I realized this, the logical next step was to think, how can I do a show in which the fundamental drive is toward change?" By showing Walt's trajectory from good to bad and his moral ambiguities, *Breaking Bad* is able to break away from traditional representations of masculinity and delivers a more realized, complex man.

Walt is a complex character with ambiguous motives and we continue to root for him because the show does not only seek the audience's empathy for Walt's character but provides an understanding for where the character is coming from. Gilligan imagined Walt as "an Everyman character who decides to 'break bad' and become a criminal" (Martin 2013, 267). In

an interview with Sarah Sweeney (2014), Gilligan admits: “The idea that I was about to turn 40, and [Thomas Schnauz and I] were a couple of plain-Jane, law-abiding citizens created the foundation for a character that was kind of like me, except with chemistry and scientific knowledge” Furthermore, on the AMC website, Gilligan explains:

I think [men] can all relate to Walt from time to time. Hopefully we don’t live too long in his shoes, but I think we’ve all had those moments where, ‘The other guy’s getting ahead and I’m not; I don’t have enough money in my bank account; I don’t get appreciated and respected for my work.’ We’ve all had those thoughts from time to time, so I think yeah in a lot of ways Walt is me. But I think what potentially works for the show is that in a lot of ways, Walt is everybody (Neumann 2008).

Although the character of Walt serves as an extension of his creator’s thoughts and experiences, some critics have taken a more reductionist approach to explain the appeal of the series as means to cater to the whims of its male creators and audiences, but they neglect the nuances of its characters and narrative. Martin (2013) argues, “Not only were the most important shows of the era run by men, they were also largely about manhood,” and thus “middle-aged men predominated because middle-aged men had the power to create them” (13). In her analysis of television’s new “Golden Age,” Maureen Ryan (2014) reports that since 2006 only nine percent of the original programming team at AMC have been a female and ethnic minority. Thus, reflecting the climate of such a white, male dominated contemporary television industry, Inkoo Kang (2014) claims that this particular era is best described as television’s “Golden Age of Discrimination.”

Additionally, Pauline Kael interpreted this trend as “an attempt by adult males to justify staying inside the small range of experience of their boyhood and adolescence – that period when masculinity looked so great and important” (Martin 2013, 14). Barbara Hall, who worked on shows such as *Northern Exposure* (1990-1995) and *Judging Amy* (1999-2005) also characterizes the sensibilities of her fellow male show runners: “Big money, big toys, and kind of warfare.

What's not to like?" (Martin 2013, 14). However, I argue that male-centered dramas, and *Breaking Bad* in particular, are adept commentaries on the condition of contemporary white hetero-normative men. In this second chapter, I analyze the representation of *Breaking Bad*'s Walt as a misguided father and husband, and as an underrated chemical genius.

The Diminished Masculinity of Walter White

In the pilot episode of *Breaking Bad*, the first time Walt appears on screen he wears only his underwear and a gasmask while frantically racing an RV through New Mexico's desert. Two bodies slide across the floor in the back of the RV and another gasmask-wearing man is passed out on the passenger seat. Walt crashes into a ditch, then jumps out coughing from the fumes and puts on a green button-down shirt. As sirens grow nearer, he records a heartfelt goodbye speech to his family that "neatly sets up the 'who', 'what', 'when' and 'where' of the series" (Cardinale 2012). Walt then faces the oncoming sirens with a gun steadily pointed in their direction and a determined look on his face. "Here, his disheveled mismatched body illustrates a broken down and reconstructed amalgam ... the nakedness of rebirth, the formal dress shirt of his professional life, the gun-in-the waistband that bespeaks danger, death, and renegade ... it is here that Vince Gilligan begins a narrative that explores our anxieties over time and the multiple existences that thrive within the converging past, present, and future of Walter White in *Breaking Bad*" (Freeley 2014, 33).

We now flash back three weeks prior to that climactic moment: it is the morning of Walt's fiftieth birthday and, in contrast to the confident man who is prepared to face the police and possibly die, White is introduced as a meek and inconspicuous everyman living in a suburb of Albuquerque, New Mexico with his pregnant wife and disabled son. He is awake long before his alarm clock rings and joylessly goes about his morning routine. His former home office is

now packed with baby accessories; a certificate of contribution to research that was subsequently awarded a Nobel Prize in 1985 serves as the only reminder of his failed endeavors and missed opportunities. The first interaction we see with his wife Skyler further establishes Walt's diminished masculine state and invisibility to his family:

Skyler: [Serving a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon, spelling out the number 50] Happy Birthday!

Walter: [bewildered] Look at that.

Skyler: That is veggie bacon, believe it or not. Zero cholesterol and you won't even taste the difference. What time do you think you'll be home?

Walter: Same time.

Skyler: I don't want 'em dicking you around tonight. You get paid 'til five, you work 'til five, no later. ("Pilot")

Skyler's remark implies that until this point Walt's behavior has been unassertive and essentially professionally impotent. As we follow Walt through his day, we come to understand his life as "an endless parade of humiliations. His students disrespect him, his pregnant wife emasculates him, his alpha-male brother-in-law mocks him, and his employer abuses him. To make things worse, he is diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer" (Kovvali 2013). Additionally, Walt's invisibility and depressed state are reflected in his outer appearance. In an interview with David Bianculli (2010) actor Bryan Cranston describes how he had envisioned Walt's character after reading the script for the first time: "I [thought Walt] should be a little pudgy. I [thought] he should be pale ... I [thought] he should have this silly mustache that doesn't convey anything, except that it conveys impotence to me. It was unnecessary. And it sort of was a manifestation of what I thought his life was like at that time, basically unnecessary, that he felt useless, invisible to the world, to society, even to himself."

With only a few months to live, Walt reflects on his life, wonders how he will be remembered, and worries about the financial security of his children. Walt accompanies his brother-in-law, DEA agent Hank Schrader, during the bust of another local meth laboratory after

seeing a television report on one of Hank's previous operations and noted the large amount of cash that was seized. After peeking into a makeshift lab that yielded thousands of dollars worth of drugs, Walt decides that cooking crystal meth is the fastest way to generate enough funds to provide for his family after he dies ("Pilot"). Thus, Walt's decision to "break bad" is driven by fatherhood. Lotz (2014) explains "protagonists of the male-centered serials are uniformly fathers" (68) and maintains, "Perhaps more than anything else, desire to fulfill the responsibility of fatherhood propels the characters in the series. The men specifically value fatherhood, not simply a reconstitution of family ..." (69). The role of the father is therefore a central theme in *Breaking Bad* and the struggle of what it means to be a good father is an important part of Walt's identity.

The Evolution of Fathers on Television

The role of father is often equated with traditional masculinity in film and television. However, the representation of the father figure on the small screen has undergone several changes over time. In her article in *Forbes*, Jenna Goudreau (2010) explains that early television shows like *Father Knows Best* (CBS, 1954-1960) and *Leave it to Beaver* (CBS/ABC, 1957-1963) portrayed fathers simply as patriarchs and the moral authority. She recalls that television families of that period spent most of their time together around the dinner table where they would discuss their day's events. Goudreau (2010) succinctly characterizes the father of that era by quoting Al Martin: "The classic archetype of a 1950s dad was to bring home the bacon, get involved in the children's lives and be the wise disciplinarian."

The 1970s and 1980s gave way to new family models on television in which parents shared their economic and parenting responsibilities. Flawed characters, like Archie Bunker in *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971-1979); dual-income parents, like Heathcliff and Clair Huxtable in

The Cosby Show (NBC, 1984-1992); and patchwork families, like stepfather Mike Brady in *The Brady Bunch* (ABC, 1969-1974) became the norm (Goudreau 2010). Bob Thompson, director of the Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University, tells *CNN*:

While dads in ‘Leave It to Beaver’ and ‘The Donna Reed Show’ had flaws, they were close to what was then thought of as ‘perfect,’ part of an idealized white American family. Later, shows such as ‘The Cosby Show,’ ‘Family Ties,’ ‘Growing Pains’ and ‘Full House’ showcased caring dads of a new generation. But by the late 1980s, more shows wanted to distance themselves ‘from the corny, syrupy stuff’ – and in stepped shows such as ‘Married With Children’ and ‘The Simpsons.’ It’s only natural that comedies would take on dads (Levs 2012).

While the moms became stronger characters, the father’s role became less significant. Both *The Simpsons* (FOX, 1989-) and *Married with Children* (FOX, 1987-1997) thus present what Goudreau (2010) calls anti-dads and childish husbands. In a February 16, 1986, article for *The New York Times* Peter J. Boyer claims, “[S]itcom dads of recent history tended to be the butt of family jokes, and sitcom families tended to center around the children and women.”

According to Goudreau, with the rise of feminism “moms began overshadowing TV dads, who played the part of the well-meaning idiot. Now, in this era of anything-goes-TV, primetime lineups offer a range of dads and family set-ups that, arguably, more accurately reflect modern fathers: breadwinners, nurturers, sages, bumlbers and, most importantly, real guys who want to be great fathers but don’t always know what they’re doing” (2010). Taking into consideration different parenting configurations, she names contemporary sitcoms like *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-) and *Parenthood* (NBC, 2010-) as two examples that portray same-sex couples and stay-at-home dads. Reflecting on these contemporary trends, Bob Thompson argues, “[T]he growing push for ‘recognizable’ dads who reflect today’s realities are probably to credit for these characters” (Levs 2012).

Television's focus has shifted away from career women and housewives toward men's predicament in their roles as fathers and husbands. In her provocative September 28, 2003, article for *The New York Times*, Alessandra Stanley argues that men are the new women and speaks of television's elastic effect. She credits the feminization of the television industry for making women the focal point of television series. Stanley also notes that men have waned in the process and are now portrayed as a minority group on the small screen but, "Television writers who once focused on women's dilemmas are now exploring the emotional difficulty of being a man in today's world" (Stanley 2003).

Bryan Cranston's two most notable roles exemplify the very different representations of fathers on television described by Stanley. Before his famous turn as *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White, Cranston was best known for his performance as the disengaged and goofy but loving father Hal in the popular sitcom *Malcolm in the Middle* (FOX, 2000-2006). In an interview with Melissa Locker (2011), Cranston was asked what he found appealing about the character Hal when first reading the script for Malcolm. Cranston replied: "I actually didn't [find it appealing]. When I read the pilot episode it was really all about Lois, the mom, and Malcolm, the son ... My character had four, maybe five, lines and I didn't get a sense of him at all or where he was and I didn't know what to do with it" (Locker 2011). On the contrary, the Walter White character introduced in Gilligan's pilot script for *Breaking Bad* resonated with Cranston so much, he told Oliver Burkeman in a March 23, 2014, article for *The Guardian*, "When I went into my first meeting with Vince, I told *him* how Walter White should look: how he should walk, how much he should weigh, that he should have a silly moustache, that he should blend into the walls, that he should be invisible to society." Cranston's progression from the ineffectual goofball Hal to

the memorable and very complex Walter White exemplifies the path of male characters, especially fathers, toward the foreground of television.

When *Breaking Bad*'s pilot aired on January 20, 2008, it was initially difficult for viewers and critics to look past Cranston's previous role as funny dad Hal in the sitcom *Malcolm in the Middle*. In an interview with Sanjiv Bhattacharya (2013), Cranston recalls: "[Gilligan] had to fight for me. Not everyone was convinced. Wait a minute, you want the dad from *Malcolm in the Middle* to play Walter White?" Early reviews of *Breaking Bad* even drew connections to the comedy genre and compared it to other contemporary comedy series. For example, in a January 13, 2008 article for *The New York Times*, Alessandra Stanley described the show as "a bleaker male version of 'Weeds,' Showtime's comedy about a widowed soccer mom who sells pot to keep up with the Joneses." Mittell (2012-2013) argues, "Certainly *Breaking Bad* was initially widely known as 'that show where Malcolm's dad gets cancer and becomes a drug dealer,' an important framework for how Walter White was perceived." That Walt was supposed to only wear a pair of white underwear in the show's pilot furthermore conjured up images of *Malcolm*'s Hal. However, Cranston explains, "Hal wore [tighty-whiteys] because he always wore them and it never occurred to him to wear anything else. He's still a boy. Walter White wore them because he stopped growing. ... He just stopped caring. ... He's given up." (Locker 2011). As time went on, Cranston's outstanding performance as Walter White quickly shook off any references to Hal. "Who knew that the goofy dad from *Malcolm in the Middle* would make such a compelling gangster?" (Bhattacharya 2013).¹

¹ Among the included features on the DVD and Blu-ray set released on November 26, 2013, is a four minute video clip with an alternate ending that imagines *Breaking Bad* as a nightmare by *Malcolm*'s Hal, starring both Cranston and his former co-star Jane Kaczmarek (Lois). Linking the two series, it also addresses the underwear issue: "The only thing that made sense is that I still

With the emergence of long-form dramatic story-telling in the late-1990s and its ongoing development throughout the 21st century, fathers are currently viewed from a different angle. Although they are still far from being the next Jim Anderson or Ward Cleaver, we now perceive their struggle to be a dad as sincere and compelling. Lotz (2014) argues, “the male-centered serials construct paternity as a crucial component of men’s identity” (70) and unlike their comical predecessors, these dramas turn the fathers’ flaws and failures into tragic and heartbreaking qualities (69). Fatherhood is traditionally portrayed as a great achievement but in contemporary dramas infidelity and criminality interfere with this goal. Thus, Pamela Nettleton (2009) claims, “these dramas dismantle traditional notions of family and challenge definitions of masculinity” (185).

“The context of the protagonists’ relationships with their own fathers – a matter attended to in fair detail in several of the series – also proves useful to understanding the characters’ motivations, dilemmas, and actions as fathers” (Lotz 2014, 73). The following examples consistently show characters in contentious relationships with their own flawed fathers: Mafia boss Tony Soprano comes to terms with his relationship to his deceased father Johnny; a shameless narcissist who placed his own needs above those of his wife and children. Through dream sequences and flashbacks, we learn that his father has repeatedly involved Tony from childhood in his criminal business and frequently used him as alibi in his adulteries. David Chase once described *The Sopranos* as: “It was *Father Knows Best* ... how to kill people” (Martin 2013, 84). Although Tony not only took over his father’s business and adopted many of his selfish traits, he made it a point not to expose his children to his criminal life.

walked around in my underwear.” The clip closes with Walter White’s/Heisenberg’s hat lying on a chair, insinuating that it might not have been a dream after all.

Unlike Tony Soprano, the homicidal Dexter Morgan is not able to draw a straight line between satisfying his corrupting psychological “dark passenger” and living up to his fatherly duties. Over the course of *Dexter*, the domestic façade that initially serves as Dexter’s alibi gradually draws him into a marriage with two adoptive children and a newborn son. Although Dexter genuinely loves his wife Rita and all of his children, he often puts his needs above the ones of his family and continues his secret life as serial killer. Not only does Dexter cheat on Rita with another woman, he inadvertently causes Rita's violent death by leading another killer into their family home. Similar to Tony Soprano, Dexter lacks a good role model. His adoptive father, Harry Morgan, was a decorated police detective who trained his son to live by a code that restricts him to only kill other killers. After Harry’s death, he appears to Dexter in visions and serves as a personal moral compass, essentially embodying Dexter’s conscience. Dexter’s idolized notion of Harry, however, begins to crumble as Dexter learns that his role model withheld knowledge of Dexter’s brother and had an affair with Dexter’s biological mother. Eventually, Dexter discovers that Harry did not die out of natural causes but in fact committed suicide after witnessing Dexter’s first kill and realizing that he had created a monster.

Mad Men’s Don Draper, whose real identity is Dick Whitman, suffered in his formative years by being the product of his father's affair with a prostitute, who died during childbirth. His alcoholic father and stepmother, Abigail, physically and emotionally abused Don. As much as Don despises his father, he shares his weakness for alcohol and women, which leads to a divorce from his wife, Betty. Don is also persistently absent from his children's lives and hands over the responsibility to his wife.

Similarly, Deputy US Marshal Raylan Givens in *Justified* puts his work and himself before the needs of his pregnant ex-wife, Winona, and is consistently absent during the

pregnancy and birth of his baby girl. When Raylan is sent back to his hometown of Harlan, Kentucky in the first season of *Justified*, he must deal with his past, especially his estranged habitually criminal father, Arlo. However, the seeds for this dysfunctional family were sown decades earlier. After the death of Raylan's mother, his father and aunt Helen, who later became his stepmother, were the ones who raised Raylan. As a Vietnam veteran, Arlo suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and bipolar depression. He is also an alcoholic, drug-abusing career criminal and introduced Raylan at a young age to a world of crime and violence. It is because of his dread toward his father that Raylan chose his career as a US Marshal, during which he repeatedly arrests and jails his father for various crimes. At the end of the fourth season, Arlo is attacked in prison and dies from his stabbing wound. Against any expectations that Raylan and his father might reconcile on his deathbed, Arlo's last words to his son are: "Kiss my ass."

These examples show a generation of men on television that grew up without a truly positive fatherly role model. The male protagonists all have to deal with flawed fathers who indulge in women, alcohol, and criminal activities. Even Dexter's father Harry, who is on the side of the law, was unfaithful to his wife and misused Dexter as a tool to pursue criminals who slipped through the cracks in the legal system. It is also noteworthy that mothers are absent from the male protagonists' lives either by death or by choice. The mothers of Don Draper, Raylan Givens, and Dexter for instance died during childbirth or were killed when the protagonist was still at a very young age. Furthermore, the relationships the protagonists have with their surrogate mothers are uneasy and subordinate. The protagonists thus lack an intact mother-son relationship. Additionally, "The relationships that the men have with their fathers are quite different from those that they seek to have with their own children, and many pursue a parenting strategy that deliberately contradicts their own experience" (Lotz 2014, 73). Although most of

the protagonists mentioned above have good intentions and genuinely try to do their role as father justice, they tend to involuntarily step into their father's footsteps and repeat their father's mistakes.

Father-Son Relationships in *Breaking Bad*

Although *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White reflects some flawed fathering traits of the contemporary male protagonists, he deviates from the pattern in significant ways. Unlike other male-centered dramas, *Breaking Bad* is very subtle about the relationship between White and his deceased father. *Breaking Bad*'s cast is kept very small and neither Walt's parents nor his in-laws appear in the show and it is late into the fourth season when Walt briefly mentions his father in a conversation with Walt Jr. ("Salud"). In order to explain his drunken behavior and beat up appearance the night before, Walt relates to his son that his father's health had rapidly declined after he had been diagnosed with Huntington's disease. Walt was only a young boy but he "remembers the twisted body, the empty eyes that didn't seem to focus on him, the terrible disinfectant smell of the hospital, and his breathing: 'This rattling sound like if you were shaking an empty spray paint can – like there was nothing in him'" (Bowman 2011). Walt describes how the horrific image of his dying, hospitalized father still haunts him, and that he does not want his son to go through the same experience. "Fathers are significant to protagonists' identity negotiations even when absent" (Lotz 2014, 74). To see his father helplessly bound to a hospital bed and to witness his father's slow death certainly shapes White's desire "to go out on his own terms and die like a man," as Gilligan put it in a podcast with Kelley Dixon (2013). Silpa Kovvali (2013) sees White's cancer diagnosis as "an opportunity for change, to take control over his life. 'Right from the start it's a death sentence,' [White] later explains. 'That's what they keep telling me. Well guess what? Every life comes with a death sentence ... Maybe even today

I'm going to hear some bad news, but until then. Who's in charge? Me. That's how I live my life.'”

Contrary to White, the series explores in more detail the conflict between White's former student and meth-cooking partner, Jesse Pinkman, with his upper middle-class parents, who banished him from their family home after his numerous drug escapades. Pearson Moore (2012) argues, “Jesse's family connections are deeper and more important than those of any other character in the series” (79). When Jesse wakes up in his parents' backyard after a bad drug-using experience, it is his father who has a change of heart and questions whether they should welcome him home. Jesse's mother functions here as the cruel voice of reason, reminding the father of all the times they have been betrayed by their son. It is a surprising turn of gender roles, because we might expect the mother to be the forgiving, love-conquers-all parent. Instead, Jesse's mother behaves rather cold and uncaring. In his September 23, 2013 article for *The New York Times*, Ross Douthat claims that “there's no hint of a childhood trauma here, no sign of parental neglect, no initial shock that catalyzed Jesse's own break bad the way cancer catalyzed Walt's.” I argue, however, that Jesse's point of view implies that his helicopter parents' high expectations and favoritism of his younger brother, Jake, pushed Jesse toward a life of drugs and crime. To Jesse's parents, Jake is viewed as the traditionally more masculine of the two brothers, being the one interested in sports and showcasing soccer trophies. Additionally, Jake is a good student. By much contrast, Jesse was a poor student and talented artist who used to draw his high school friends as comic book characters. At various times during his harrowing experiences in *Breaking Bad*, Jesse's kind heart and nurturing traits resurface, such as the way Jesse treats children and how he cared for his dying aunt. Ultimately, Jesse turns his back on his parents and

begins to treat Walt as surrogate father. However, Walt's relationships to both his biological and surrogate son prove highly dysfunctional.

Walt and Walt Jr.

Whereas Dexter Morgan and Raylan Givens represent two masculine men who are blindsided by fatherhood, Walter White begins his story as an unassertive father who loves his wife and son without question. Unlike Tony Soprano and Don Draper, who initially work in criminal and corruptible businesses, Walt is a mild-mannered high school chemistry teacher who works part-time at a carwash. Despite his futile efforts to be an ideal, masculine father to whom his son can admire, Walt's initially repressed pride and egotism gradually become major obstacles in his father-son relationship. To Walt, a good father is synonymous with being the family's beloved provider and patriarch, but he is unable to meet those standards. Although Walter Jr. seems to favor his father over his mother, Walt and Walt Jr. do not spend a lot of time together or participate in any father-son activities. Aside from providing rides to and from school and the occasional breakfast and dinner scenes, Walt has no interaction with his son. His pursuit of a successful drug empire draws him further from his family, and although Walt gains respect and power in his job as meth cook, he is absent for his son's sixteenth birthday and his daughter's birth.

With newfound success in the drug business, he attempts to convey his love and affection towards his children with money. In season two, Walt shows his infant daughter, Holly, the drug money he accumulated over time and carefully hid in the air vent in the baby's room, "See what your daddy did for you?" he whispers in her ear ("Phoenix"). Thus, his approach to fatherhood becomes increasingly materialistic, believing that his children are more grateful for a financially secure future than shaping good memories with their father. Complicating the family

relationships, Walt frequently misuses his role as father in order to establish his power and masculinity. Scenes that might be interpreted as fathering cannot conceal Walt's egoism and desire for power. For example, in the pilot episode, Walt defends his son against a group of bullies in a clothing store. Walt steps in before Skyler can interfere and he beats one of the bullies to teach him a lesson. What looks like a father standing up for his disabled son is in fact Walt's attempt to prove to himself and his wife that he can be the protector of the family. In season four, despite Skyler's warning to keep a low profile by not spending their drug money and her wish to buy Walt Jr. a safe vehicle that is appropriate for a teenager's first car, Walt buys his son an extravagant sports car in an attempt to buy Walt Jr.'s affection and fuel a power struggle between him and his wife. When Skyler chides Walt and insists the car should be returned, Walt Jr. consequently blames his mother and sees her as the cruel parent. Rejecting Walt's apology that he only did it for the good of the family, Skyler replies, "Someone has to protect this family from the man that protects this family" ("Cornered").

Eventually, everything in Walt's life revolves around money and his desire to be his family's sole provider. However, this creates a rift in the family as his criminal career begins to swallow his life as father and husband. After Walt divulges his secret business to Skyler in season two, her first response is to demand that he leave the family house and insists that their children will live with their aunt Marie and uncle Hank in order to shield them from Walt's criminal lifestyle. This further strains the relationship between Walt and Skyler and their relationship with their children. Walt Jr. primarily directs anger toward his mother for concealing the truth about Walt's drug business, but in later seasons he also distances himself from his father, adopting the nickname "Flynn" and thus attempting to forge an identity of his own. R.J. Mitte (Walter Jr.) explains: "You know, I feel that Walt Jr. and Skyler's relationship has been

tense ... because Skyler was hiding a lot of things from Junior, and he knew something was up, and I think seeing that something was up was hurting him more than not telling him. And I feel there was just a lot of animosity towards his mother because his mother knew. His mom knew what was going on, his dad knew what was going on: basically, everyone but him. And I feel that it was just eating and eating at Junior” (Watkins 2013).

Margaret Lyons (2012) claims, “The show’s technically about a father, one who got involved in the drug trade in the first place to provide for his family, but we sure don’t see a lot of fathering going on. All the instances of real fatherhood are polluted, all the guidance warped. *Breaking Bad* doesn’t have a dad.” Furthermore, she argues, “Instead of dads, we see uncles and cousins and brothers. The real father figure in Walt Jr.’s life is his Uncle Hank, whom he worships and who seems to adore him right back. The head of the Salamanca family isn’t a father, it’s a Tio, and Gus’s chicken chain isn’t *Los Pollos Padres*. The guys who come after Hank are cousins (2012). Indeed, the rivalry between White and his macho brother-in-law Hank often manifests in their conflicting relationships with Walt Jr. By looking for a more assertive role model, Walt Jr. gravitates toward his uncle Hank and is both proud and impressed by his work as DEA agent. It is mostly Hank who fathers Walt Jr., providing him with fatherly advice and occasional lectures on the danger of drugs, and Walt Jr. turns to Hank whenever he has a problem.

The antagonistic relationship between Hank and Walt culminates in the second season’s tenth episode “Over,” establishing Walt Jr. as the clear victim of his father’s jealousy. After the receiving news that Walt’s cancer has gone into remission, Skyler arranges a family celebration. During the BBQ party, she toasts to Elliot and Gretchen, who she believes paid for her husband’s cancer treatment. Feeling his status as provider undermined once again, Walt gets increasingly

drunk and reacts outwardly annoyed at Hank's macho anecdotes. When Walt starts pouring tequila for his under aged son, Hank taunts him: "What, are you going for 'Father of the Year'?" When Walt silently pours another round, Walt Jr. looks at Hank as if asking for his permission. Walt snaps angrily, "What are you looking at him for?" After pouring a third round, Hank finally interferes and walks away with the bottle of tequila in hand. No longer holding back his hostility and jealously, Walt exclaims, "My son, my bottle, my house." At that instant, to Walt's embarrassment, Walt Jr. vomits into their swimming pool. While Hank serves as the real fatherly role model in this scene, Walt's yearning for power and control cloud his judgment and only push his son further away. Andrew Lanham (2013) suggests that "Walt wants to exercise the same control within his family that he does in his drug business, and he wants both his son and Hank to know the kind of power he wields in the outside world. These complex motivations, however, conflict violently with one another. ... The power Walt has discovered to protect and enrich his family thus works precisely and paradoxically by tearing his family apart."

Walt Jr.'s underlying perception of his father as unassertive increasingly aggravates their father-son relationship. For example, Walt cannot appreciate the kindness behind Walt Jr.'s website, SaveWalterWhite.com, which he created to raise money for his Walt's cancer treatment. Instead, Walt sees it as a sign that his son undermines his position as provider and patriarch. On the website, Walt Jr. claims: "My dad is amazing. It's funny, but I didn't know that until I found out he was going to die." To Walt, this statement conveys more pity than it does love and appreciation. He does not like the fact that his son is begging for money because he does not believe that his father is able to provide the money on his own. R.J. Mitte elaborates, "I think because of Junior's CP [cerebral palsy], there's a lot of things that Walt couldn't do with his son that he can do with Jesse. We don't talk a lot about that [on the show], but I see that ... Junior

just wants that love from his father so much, and approval from his father so much, and Walt is giving it to him, but he's not giving it to him the same way he's giving it to Jesse. And Walt Junior feels like something's up, and something is going on, but he's not involved in that part of his dad's life" (Watkins 2013).

Walt and Jesse

As his secret life becomes increasingly important to Walt, his former student Jesse gradually takes the place of his son. Due to the fact that Walt cannot discuss his secret activities with anyone else but Jesse, their bond becomes more important over the course of the series. Mittell (2012-2013) states, "Walt is investing more of his emotions and energies into his secret drug career and personal relationship with his protégé Jesse than his own family" (Character, ¶68). Their relationship initially begins as a teacher-student relationship; it is Walt who contacts Jesse because he needs his help to sell the meth he cooks. Although they become business partners of sorts, "Mr. White," as Jesse calls him, takes on more of the teacher and mentor role. Acting as his arcane chemistry teacher, Walt instructs Jesse in everything from creating an almost pure meth product to properly dissolving a body. Over the course of the series, Jesse applies himself to these tasks and learns to trust Walt's instructions through trial and error. Walt finds the kind of relationship in Jesse that he lacks with his own son. After Jesse inspects Walt's first batch of crystal meth in the pilot episode, he exclaims: "This is art, Mr. White!" ("A Crazy Handful of Nothin"). By looking up to Walt and turning to him for help, Jesse shows the respect and admiration that Walt was missing. Frequently, Jesse relies on Walt's science expertise to save them in precarious situations. Walt advises Jesse and even goes as far as to kill criminals for him in order to keep Jesse safe, and Jesse's devotion means so much to Walt that he accidentally calls Walt Jr. by the name "Jesse" ("Salud").

However, Walt's apparently sincere fathering of Jesse is fundamentally flawed because he manipulates Jesse in order to maintain his allegiance. Lyons (2011) argues, "He barely parents his actual children, and the moments where it seems like he's parenting Jesse (their relationship constitutes the real father/son dynamic on the show) are fraudulent." Walt goes to great lengths to control Jesse's loyalty, such as hurting people that are close to him or causing him emotional pain. For instance, White lets Jesse's girlfriend choke to death on her own vomit while sedated on heroin, allowing Jesse to falsely believe that it was his fault as a means to steer him away from drug use and back into a close partnership ("Phoenix"). Additionally, Walt poisons Jesse's second girlfriend's son, Brock, making Jesse believe it was Gus ("End Times"). This manipulation helps him eventually defeat Gus, thereby gaining more power and protecting his family – a family that Jesse is clearly not a part of.

Prior to that resolution, Walt convinces Jesse to kill their apprentice, Gale, in order to ensure their worth to drug kingpin Gus ("Box Cutter"). Walt coldly accepts that the murder will destroy the good-natured Jesse, causing a new wave of guilt that leads him on a path of self-destruction. In the fifth season, Jesse declares that he will leave the drug business after witnessing the murder of a little boy during one of their drug heists, but Walt plies Jesse into staying with him by doing something unexpected – he invites Jesse over to his house ("Buyout"). Until then, Walt had made it a point to keep Jesse and his drug business away from his family. However, after Skyler sent the children away to live with Marie and Hank, Walt considers making this bold move. By inviting Jesse home, he lets Jesse believe that he cares about him and sees him as family. When Skyler comes home early and walks in on their "business meeting," Walt cruelly suggests they all should have dinner together. Denise Martin (2012) cites Gilligan's reflection of the scene: "We wanted worlds to collide, characters who didn't really belong

together being forced to spend time with each other by the monstrous behavior of Walter White ... You could see the gears turning in Walt's head, couldn't you? When he says, 'Hey, why don't we have dinner together?', he clearly just wants to torture the two people who in his mind have betrayed him."

Later that evening, Walt opens up to Jesse: "My wife is waiting for me to die," he confesses. He tells Jesse how he was cheated out of his fair share at his former company, Gray Matter, and how this business is all he has left. "'Jesse, you asked me if I was in the meth business or the money business. Neither. I'm in the empire business.' Jesse's reaction is exhausted and incredulous. 'I don't know, Mr. White,' Jesse says. 'Is a meth empire really something to be that proud of?'" (Zoller Seitz 2012). Although Jesse is not entirely convinced, Walt's plan works and Jesse decides to stay with him. Lyons (2011) maintains that "Whatever fathers are supposed to do for the children, and maybe for their sons in particular, is not what Walt has done for Jesse. Jesse was better off when Mr. White was just his chemistry teacher, because when that person said 'apply yourself,' it was so Jesse could learn something. Now when Walt wants Jesse to apply himself, it's so Walt can have something."

These sinister manipulations suggest that Walt views Jesse more like a chess piece in his game of building an empire than as a surrogate son, but it is evident that Walt shares some degree of affection toward Jesse because he repeatedly refuses to kill him. Over the course of the series, Walt ignores both Gus's and Skyler's advice to get rid of Jesse when he becomes troublesome. Although Jesse's final betrayal of Walt and tenuous allegiance with Hank cause Walt to turn Jesse over to Todd and his Nazi uncle Jack, Walt ultimately takes a bullet for Jesse and saves his life. Dan Snierson (2013) explains:

Walt's unplanned self-sacrifice in shielding Jesse from the bullet not only exposed what humanity was left in Walter White, but underlined the significance of their relationship,

no matter how fractured. '[When] he hears that the blue meth is still out there, that Jesse is still cooking, it's like, 'That bastard! He convinced them to be a partner with him, he's still cooking! I'll kill everybody!' says Cranston. 'And then when I see him, the shred of humanity left in Walter White is exposed at that moment and he acts. So if there's any redeeming quality to him from the standpoint of the audience, it's that moment.'

It is also important to recognize that Walt shares a significant parting scene with Jesse, whereas he can only say goodbye to his son Walt Jr. from a distance without his son ever knowing of his presence. R.J. Mitte (Walt Jr.) argues that White's relationship to Jesse is more important than his relationship to Walt Jr., and although "Walt Jr. is Walt's real son, I don't think he wants to use that as his leverage against him, while at the same time, Jesse is his surrogate son, and he is using Jesse for his will. And I think out of that comes more love, in a sick and twisted kind of way" (Watkins 2013).

For Robert Bly (1990), modern masculinity has lost its way because the father's role has been forgotten (92). He argues that men must stop becoming more feminine and should return to what Bly calls the 'wild man inside every man' (225). Over the course of *Breaking Bad*, Walt also discovers his "wild" side on his conflicted path to "break bad" and to establish himself as an archetypically inspired father. Walt believes that a good father should be a provider and authority figure, and certainly someone to look up to. He desperately wanted Walt Jr. and Jesse to look up to him and aspire to be like him, and he thought that could be achieved through ruthless manipulations. However, White is blinded by his desire for money and power and cannot see that his manipulations destroy the father-son bonds. Walt fails to be a father and mentor to both his son Walt Jr. and protégé, Jesse. "Such overtly patriarchal rhetoric, contrasted with the hideous actions Walt does toward others and eventually toward his family itself, articulates the hollow, rotten core of traditional masculinity as portrayed on the series" (Mittell 2012-2013, *Serial Melodrama*, ¶34).

Both sons have been deceived by Walt and lost people who are close to them. Walt Jr. will never forgive his father for lying to him, for destroying his family, and especially for being responsible for Hank's death. Similarly, Jesse despises Walt for his lies and the pain he caused him, especially the death of his girlfriend, Jane. White's attempt to reconcile with both sons by giving them what he thinks they need most shows the conflicted love he has for them, but his actions remain futile. Walt Jr. may never learn that the money he will receive from Elliot and Gretchen is actually his father's criminal legacy, and although Jesse can be grateful for a second chance, he will be emotionally scarred for life. However, it could be said that Walt Jr. and Jesse regain their independence from Walt and essentially walk away from him. In particular, Jesse proves to no longer be a pawn in Walt's games. Cranston explains, "[Walt] even allows Jesse to kill him. Jesse has the gun and he points at me, and he says, 'You want this?' And I go, 'Yeah. I think it's fitting. Go ahead. You need to do it, go ahead. It's okay.' And then [Jesse] says, 'If you want this, then do it yourself. I'm not going to do it for you.' At least there was some conclusion to their association. Their friendship did matter" (Snierson 2013).

CHAPTER III: BEING A HUSBAND AND CAREER MAN IN *BREAKING BAD*

Marriage in *Breaking Bad*: Walter and Skyler

In addition to their emphasis on paternity, male-centered dramas also bring the role of husbands to the foreground. As Lotz (2014) explains, “The presence of and attention to domestic affairs is one of the primary distinctions of the male-centered serial, which features considerable thematic consistency in depicting the men’s home lives” (68). Similar to their unstable and dysfunctional father-son relationships, marital bonds are equally disrupted and destructive in these series. In some male-centered dramas, the marriage is already over when the series begins and it depicts the characters’ struggle to rekindle their relationship.

In *Justified*, for example, Rayland renews his relationship to his ex-wife, Wynona, but her unexpected pregnancy and Rayland’s lack of commitment make it difficult for their relationship to last. *Rescue Me*’s Tommy Gavin is also separated from his wife Janet and their children at the beginning of the show because of his post 9/11 trauma and his failure to commit to his family. Over the course of the series Tommy and Janet have a tumultuous love-hate marriage. Although their relationship is disrupted by domestic violence and adultery, Tommy and Janet renew their wedding vows at the end of the seventh season. Other series portray dysfunctional relationships that often end in divorce or some sort of separation. *Mad Men*’s Don and Betty have built their marriage on lies and unspoken hurt feelings. Don continuously cheats on his wife while Betty increasingly becomes unhappy and unsatisfied with their life together. Their marriage ends in a divorce followed by new marriages for both characters. In *The Sopranos*, the marriage between Tony and Carmela Soprano is challenged by infidelity and criminal activities, and although the couple reunites after a separation period, their relationship remains unstable and it is left open whether their marriage will survive. *Dexter* significantly

focuses on the complex relationship between Dexter and Rita, who is recovering from an abusive former marriage and ironically finds feelings of security and love in the secret serial killer.

Although Rita and Dexter eventually marry, their marriage suffers from Dexter's infidelity and deceptions. After Rita's violent death, Dexter's subsequent relationships with women are short-lived and although he eventually discovers the potential for a happy future with his soul mate and fellow killer Hannah, it is ultimately denied to him.

The marriage of *Breaking Bad*'s Walter and Skyler White is also plagued by problems. In what initially seems to be a mostly benign marriage of a repressed husband and a dominating wife, their relationship begins to crumble with Walt's transition into crime. As Walt begins to cook crystal meth he rediscovers his self-esteem and uses that newfound strength to disrupt the power distribution in their household. In contrast to the aforementioned male-centered dramas, Walt "has lived a life forever repressed and stripped of the limited power available to him. His family affairs up until this point have been predominantly controlled by Skyler ..." (Strauss 2013). She frequently orders her husband around and chides him about using the wrong credit card or coming home late. When Skyler serves vegetable bacon to her husband and son in the pilot episode, Walt Jr. demands: "What the hell is this? ... I want real bacon, not this fake crap." Walt, who is similarly disgusted, sides with Skyler to keep the peace and tells his son to just eat the food. Walt's emasculated, unassertive state further emphasizes Skyler's dominant role as matriarch. Pearson Moore (2012) argues that "[White] is less than he should be, less than he could be, held captive by and subordinate to forces we cannot know with certainty. Rather than 'wearing the pants' and leading the family as father, he has become the subordinate parent, neither the head for the family nor even an equal partner to his hard-charging wife, Skyler" (26). Furthermore, Moore observes, "We are to understand that in his rejection of 'fake crap' Junior is

not speaking only for himself, but for masculine propriety in general. He was forcefully directing our attention to the incongruity – to the subversion of masculine prerogative – exemplified by a woman’s decision to replace real bacon (symbolically, the value that a man brings to his family) with artificial bacon. Symbolically, Skyler was asserting that Walter was not the provider for their family” (28).

Walt's impotent behavior is further stressed in his sexual relationship with Skyler. In the pilot episode, Walt and Skyler share a significant scene in their bedroom on the night of his birthday. Skyler is using her laptop computer, bidding on eBay, while White tries to go to sleep. Casually, Skyler reaches under the blanket to sexually stimulate Walt as a birthday present, never taking her eyes off the computer screen. Although Walt is surprised, he does not protest the sexual advance, and they continue to talk about their plans for next week, organizing and adjusting their schedules, which causes Skyler’s gesture to lose its sensual appeal. When Skyler notices that Walt has failed to get an erection, she asks if anything is wrong and tells him to simply close his eyes. He obeys but the scene takes on a further comedic quality when Walt mistakes Skyler’s mounting excitement about her eBay auction for a sparked interest in him that abruptly ends with her winning the auction. However, their sexual relationship changes after Walt had his first taste of the dangerous drug business that sparks his will to live and regenerates his masculinity, as well as his sex drive. After narrowly escaping two murderous drug dealers and the police, Walt enters their bedroom late at night. When Skyler faces him and inquires where he has been, he does not answer. “Walt, the worst thing you can do is shut me out,” Skyler complains. Without saying a word, Walt kisses her passionately and begins to make love to her from behind. That Walt suddenly takes control of their sex life clearly strikes Skyler by surprise,

to which she calls out: “Walt, is that you?” Walt’s decision to “break bad” allows him to transform himself into his alter-ego Heisenberg; a stronger, more masculine version of himself.

The Curious Case of Skyler White

Although previous male-centered dramas have been discussed in terms of the protagonists’ troubling relationships with their wives and viewers have proven to generally favor the shows’ male characters, perhaps no other female character has been so disliked as *Breaking Bad*’s Skyler White. This has sparked debates that call male favoritism into question and criticize the treatment of the show’s female characters. When viewers began to transfer their anger about Skyler directly to actress Anna Gunn (Skyler White), the discussion especially focused on the origin and meaning of such reactions. This led Anna Gunn to write an August 23, 2013, editorial for *The New York Times* in which she elaborates on the issue first-hand. Gunn (2013) describes Skyler as a complex character that “is outraged by the violence and destruction of the drug world, fearful for her children’s safety, disgusted by the money Walter brings in and undone by the lies and manipulation to which he subjects her.”

Although she admits that Skyler could be seen as Walt’s antagonist, she explains: “[Gilligan] wanted Skyler to be a woman with a backbone of steel who would stand up to whatever came her way, who wouldn’t just collapse in the corner or wring her hands in despair. He and the show’s writers made Skyler multilayered and, in her own way, morally compromised. But at the end of the day, she hasn’t been judged by the same set of standards as Walter.” This especially addresses the question why viewers still root for Walt after all of his manipulations and despicable crimes but hate Skyler for standing her ground and protecting her children. Gunn (2013) wonders whether viewers “can’t stand a woman who won’t suffer silently or ‘stand by her man’? That they despise her because she won’t back down or give up? Or because she is, in fact,

Walter's equal?" Although she is aware of similar viewer reactions towards other complex TV wives such as Carmela Soprano and Betty Draper, the increasing membership on the Facebook page "I hate Skyler White" and the hatred that was directed to her as an actress are still unsettling to Gunn. At the end of her editorial she concludes that "Skyler didn't conform to a comfortable ideal of the archetypical female, she had become a kind of Rorschach test for society, a measure of our attitudes toward gender."

Critics and even show-creator Vince Gilligan himself echo Gunn's opinion that the hatred for Skyler reflects a society rooted in patriarchal tradition. Alessandra Stanley observes in her December 31, 2009 article for *The New York Times*, "The 21st century was ushered in by a He Decade: 10 years of men gazing at their navels. Naturally, it's the women's fault." Skyler is often perceived to be the reason for Walt's emasculated state and hence is disliked whenever she interferes with his plans to regain his masculinity. For many critics, however, Skyler becomes a symbol for socially isolated, financially dependent women in abusive relationships. Alyssa Rosenberg (2012), for example, claims, "It's hard enough for women who aren't married to evil geniuses to leave abusive relationships. Skyler is attempting to negotiate a livable existence for herself in highly unusual circumstances." Megan Cox (2013) supports this statement and adds, Walt is "moving back into the house without Skyler's consent, sexually forcing himself on her after a crime-induced adrenaline rush, continually abusing and manipulating her to get his way, threatening to commit her to a mental institution, struggling with her in a knife fight and then kidnapping their baby. It's not often discussed that their relationship is abusive, but Skyler constantly has to negotiate protecting her children as best as she can without bringing the entire operation down. There's a healthy dose of self-preservation behind her actions." Therefore, Fiona Farnsworth (2013) asserts, "a vocal minority have made [Skyler] a pariah: a character in a

desperate situation who commits the heinous atrocity of refusing to keep quiet. Those of us who disagree – who recognize the need to eliminate this archaic desire to quieten articulate female characters – need to vocalize our opinions just as loudly. Skyler White would not be silenced, and neither will we.” Adding fuel to the fire, Gilligan further expresses his discomfort with the anti-Skyler movement: “I think the people who have these issues with the wives being too bitchy on *Breaking Bad* are misogynists, plain and simple” (Brown 2013).

However, I argue that these earlier interpretations about the show’s viewership may be too limited in their scope and neglect important facets in the characterization of Skyler White. Although the comments above credit Skyler for voicing her concern, outrage, and pain at the situation, there seems to be a consensus among critics that Skyler is a victim of Walt’s choices. For example, Gunn’s remark that Skyler “won’t suffer silently” implies that Skyler nonetheless suffers, and is relatively passive about her situation. Voicing one’s resentment is not the same as taking action. *Breaking Bad*’s strength lies in its ability to portray its characters not simply as black and white but as complex and flawed. Skyler is especially interesting because her character explores different shades of grey over the course of the series. Although it might be argued that Walt set Skyler’s descent into motion, it is her own choices that led her deeper into a precarious position. As Klostermann (2011) asserts, *Breaking Bad* is exceptional because it shows that “morality is continually a personal choice.” Therefore, I suggest that a more evenhanded analysis of Skyler White’s actions in her fundamental role as Walt’s adversary could explain the negativity directed at her from viewers.

The series follows the main character Walter White and thus the viewers know just as much as Walt knows. For example, we know that both his students and employer humiliate Walt and that he is diagnosed with terminable lung cancer. At the beginning of the series Skyler lacks

this information, which make her (re-)actions seem annoying and irrational in the eyes of the viewer. Walt's attempt to secure his children's financial future and to reclaim his masculinity in the process is perceived as heartfelt and genuine. Walt thus becomes the epitome of the underdog and wins the viewer's loyalty. Moreover, his actions do not immediately affect his children at the beginning of the series, but Walt makes it a point to keep his secret life as drug manufacturer separate from his family. On the contrary, the children are directly affected by Skyler's emotional lapses. Not only does she smoke during her pregnancy as a stress relief mechanism ("Down"), but she also banishes Walt from the house after discovering his secret life as a meth cook and contacts a divorce lawyer without informing her teenage son ("No Más"). Walt Jr. receives no explanation as to why his mother is treating his cancer stricken father this way. Naturally, he sides with his father and begs him to just come home. When Walt finally decides to stand his ground, he tells Skyler that it is still his house and they are his children too. To Walt Jr.'s great dismay, Skyler then calls the police. However, Skyler does not want to divulge Walt's criminal activities in front of Walt Jr., and without an actual divorce or any instance of domestic violence, the case is dismissed and the police leave Skyler to her own devices. Seeking revenge, Skyler sleeps with her former employer Ted Beneke ("I.F.T.").

Whereas *Breaking Bad's* critics frequently condemn Walt's sexual advances toward Skyler, they seem to neglect her affair with Ted. Although Anna Gunn (2013) sees her character as "a woman with a backbone of steel who would stand up to whatever came her way," Skyler's reliance on her sexual power contradicts the notion that she is a strong, eminently capable woman. The fact that she only uses sex to undermine Walt's power and masculinity suggests that she is powerless except as a sexualized character. Although there are several instances where Skyler demonstrates intelligence and courage, she is evocative of an archetypical femme fatal

and is ultimately bound by its limits. The show's writers could have written her character in a groundbreaking way in which sex does not factor into her agency, but instead they fall back onto stereotypes and traditional gender norms. For example, Skyler could have sabotaged Walt's business by destroying his drug money or by cleverly manipulating his close associates such as Saul Goodman or Jesse, reminiscent of what Hank later does. However, Skyler is not given the opportunity to do something as ingenious as Hank does, but instead she is reduced to a femme fatale archetype with predictable sexual prowess. Additionally, Skyler's appearance begs the comparison to classic femme fatale imagery, suggesting that the writers consciously drew connections to this archetype. Erik Kain (2012) states, "Skyler chain-smoking in the White home [is] the portrait of a femme fatal straight out of a film noir picture." This image is further stressed at Ted's birthday party at the office, where he asks Skyler to perform a rendition of Marilyn Monroe's song "Happy Birthday, Mr. President" in front of their co-workers. Flattered by the attention, she delivers her best impersonation and ends the song by kissing Ted on the cheek ("Over"). Skyler's willingness to be compared to the famous sex symbol Marilyn Monroe further objectifies her. Additionally, it is Skyler who makes advances towards Ted; she purposefully drops a box of pens in front of him and plays with her hair. Whereas Skyler criticizes Walt for his criminal behavior, she is more supportive of Ted stealing money from his company. Although she tells him that she cannot be a part of his fraud, she eventually begins to help him by falsifying the bookkeeping. When the IRS discovers Ted's accounting fraud, Skyler again falls back onto the femme fatale archetype and relies solely on her sexuality. Feigning the role of the ignorant but sexy blond, she manages to reduce Ted's charges to a fine and thus prevents further investigations that might unravel Walt's drug business ("Salud").

Brett Martin (2013) states that contemporary male-centered dramas allude to various genres, including westerns, gangster sagas, film noir, and espionage films (84). In particular, *Breaking Bad* is a kaleidoscope that mixes different genres and it could be described as a postmodern tragedy-noir. The characters of *Breaking Bad* translate traditional gender constructions from these genres for a contemporary world and present a colorful struggle to reconcile male and female types, past and present. However, it is important to note that while Skyler shares certain features of the classic femme fatale archetype, it does not completely define her character. For example, Skyler is morally ambiguous and she frequently uses her sexual power as well as lies to get what she wants. Similar to femme fatales such as Elsa Bannister (Rita Hayworth) in *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), Skyler perceives herself a victim who is trapped in a situation from which she cannot escape and therefore reacts destructively by betraying her male companions. However, Skyler is not capable of murder. Although she persuades Walt to kill his drug business partner Jesse, she is generally horrified by violence and is unwilling to kill someone herself. For example, Skyler is shocked when she finds Walt watching *Scarface*'s (1983) climactic shoot-out scene together with their baby Holly and Walt Jr. ("Hazard Pay"). The thought of being responsible for Ted's accident even causes her to suffer a bout of depression.

Rather than simply adhering to a single archetype, Skyler is a complex character whose function in the narrative can be understood by considering the other fictional influences on *Breaking Bad*. In an interview with Dan Snierson (2013), Bryan Cranston called *Breaking Bad*:

... a tragedy of almost Shakespearean level. ... Tragedy is not a bunch of bad guys doing bad things: 'Oh, they killed the good guys!' Tragedy is when the bad guys are sympathized, when you realize that it could have gone another way. There was hope for them at one time. Macbeth! Oh! In its truest sense, our story is a tragedy – an American tragedy. It's not 'good conquers evil,' it's not 'good guys against the bad guys,' it's much muddier than that. Shades of gray.

This tragic quality in *Breaking Bad* is also reflected in its structure; the five seasons are similar to the five-act composition of William Shakespeare's plays. Perhaps most reminiscent of Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (1606), *Breaking Bad* tells the story of a man's transformation from good to evil. The protagonists in both tales break the law and are consumed by their ambition to gain more power, but their hubris ultimately leads to their downfall. Additionally, as Tom Gualtieri (2013) explains, "both have powerful wives who influence their decisions (though in vastly different ways)," and:

[Walt's] real motivation is the reclamation of his manhood, some of which has been sapped by his controlling wife. Macbeth, similarly, finds his honor and valor challenged by his wife. But Walt's challenge is a reflexive one; Skyler is unaware of how her personality wears her husband down and it is Walt alone who goads himself forward. Macbeth, on the other hand, 'has no spur' but his Lady to dig at his side and, in doing so, she pushes him into action. He's just been waiting for the right signal. Walt is on his own from the start.

Similar to Lady Macbeth, Skyler essentially takes over the position as queen after Walt defeats former drug kingpin Gus. Both women are strong willed and show moments of courage and intellect. However, Lady Macbeth sees herself as burdened by social expectations of motherhood, but Skyler is a mother of two who values her family above all else. Skyler's suicide attempt, in which she wades into a swimming pool as if in a trance, has been compared to the death of *Hamlet's* Ophelia (see Emily Bazelon, 2012), but I argue that this scene is more characteristic of Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene. Like Lady Macbeth, Skyler symbolically tries to cleanse herself of her husband's crimes and her complicity, and both scenes serve as a turning point in the story. However, while Lady Macbeth is overcome by her guilt as Macbeth's accomplice and later dies off stage, it can be suggested that Skyler's suicide attempt was less than a cry for help and more a scheme to get their children out of their house and into safer custody ("Fifty-One"). When confronted by Walt afterwards, Skyler maintains, "I'm in it now,

I'm compromised, but I will not have my children living in a house where dealing drugs and hurting people and killing people is shrugged off as 'shit happens!'" However, she also admits that she is a coward and lacks Walt's scheming skills. She states, "All I can do is wait." When Walt asks, "Wait for what?" she simply replies: "For the cancer to come back." This scene thus provides viewers with the understanding that the White family is broken beyond repair and already foreshadows the show's tragic ending.

Therefore, we can see traces of the archetypal femme fatale and Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth in Skyler. The connection to these archetypes establishes Skyler's function in the narrative as Walt's foil. Additionally, it emphasizes her importance as supportive character. *Breaking Bad* serves as a postmodern tragedy-noir because we understand that the characters' downfall could have been avoided by making different decisions. Both Walt and Skyler consciously transform over the course of the series and are morally compromised. For example, Skyler deliberately chooses to stay with Walt and to become his criminal accomplice. After Walt tells her "I am the danger" in the show's fourth season, she begins to realize that her husband is no longer simply a meth cook but is involved in the drug market to a much higher degree. Skyler retreats in order to reevaluate her situation. Contemplating her option to flee to another state, she picks up her daughter Holly and drives to the Four Corners landmark where she then flips a coin twice, and both times the coin lands in Colorado. However, Skyler steps on the coin and slowly drags it back to New Mexico, reaffirming her commitment to keep her family together. Determined to find a way to make things work, she returns home with Holly ("Cornered"). She demonstrates her capability as a more clever and resourceful character by inventing Walt's gambling addiction to justify their purchase of the car wash, which they need in order to launder the accumulated drug money. She even begins to enjoy her life as Walt's accomplice and grows

in confidence, which results in rekindling their relationship (“Shotgun”). She takes over the car wash and laundering business and becomes a successful businesswoman. Megan Cox’s (2013) argument that Skyler “has to negotiate protecting her children as best as she can without bringing the entire operation down” thus begs the question why it might be important to Skyler not to jeopardize Walt’s drug business. Gilligan states, “I like Skyler a little less now that she’s succumbed to Walt’s machinations, but in the early days she was the voice of morality on the show. She was the one telling [Walt], ‘You can’t cook crystal meth’” (Brown 2013). Skyler has had the chance to be morally superior to Walt and to end not only their marriage but also his criminal activities. Although getting a divorce and giving her husband up to the police would not have been an easy choice, it was nonetheless an option for Skyler. Despite this, she decides to ride the situation out and rather becomes complicit in Walt’s crime.

Additionally, Skyler refuses to give her family up to the police even after Hank finds evidence and slowly begins to unravel Walt’s secret life as drug kingpin. Although Hank offers Skyler his help and a way out, and Walt even tells her that he will turn himself in if she promises to hold on to the money, Skyler takes charge of the situation and decides that it is best for them to remain silent (“Buried”). Together, Skyler and Walt even film a fake confession in which Walt identifies Hank as drug kingpin who forced Walt into cooking crystal meth (“Confessions”). Skyler increasingly becomes like Walt and goes as far as to suggest that Walt should kill Jesse to tie up any loose ends. She says, “We’ve come this far. For us. What’s one more?” (“Rabid Dog”). It is only after Marie tells Skyler that Hank is about to arrest Walt that Skyler begins to realize that there is no escape from this situation other than to come clean. Forced by her sister, Skyler confesses to Walt Jr. and discloses his parents’ criminal activities. When Walt returns home later that day and tries to convince his family to leave with him, Skyler

ultimately turns against him and tells him that it is over. For Skyler, there is nothing left to save. Her family is torn apart and her children know the truth. Outraged, Walt orders them to start packing, but Skyler sees through his façade and quickly reasons that he must have killed Hank. Confronting Walt about Hank, Walt confesses that he tried to save Hank but did not succeed. Skyler then grabs a knife from the kitchen counter and steps in front of Walt Jr. She calmly tells Walt that they will not go with him, however, their argument escalates quickly and soon they are both on the ground fighting. As Walt Jr. calls the police, Walt acts hastily and disappears with his infant daughter Holly. However, when Holly utters her first word “Mama” at a rest stop, Walt realizes the full extent of his action. After he leaves Holly at a fire station where two firemen discover her, Walt acknowledges that he has truly lost his family. In the following scene, Walt calls Skyler to tell her how ungrateful she has been, that she has no idea of the extent of his crimes and will end up like Hank if she makes one wrong move. Knowing that the phone call has been wiretapped by the police, Walt thus deliberately gives Skyler an alibi. When Skyler understands what Walt is doing she says in a choked up voice “I’m sorry” (“Ozymandias”).

The episode “Ozymandias” caused an outrage among critics who initially viewed Walt’s cruel words toward Skyler in his phone call as proof of Walt’s underlying hatred for her and thus saw Skyler’s status as victim confirmed. Although most critics later acknowledged the fact that Walt’s call was intentionally hateful to exonerate Skyler and publicly revised their reviews of the episode (see Maureen Ryan 2013, Emily Nussbaum 2013, Matt Zoller Seitz 2013, Jason Mittell 2013), they still question whether Walt meant what he said on a subconscious level.

Additionally, they see the phone-call as a meta-fictional mirror for viewers who root for Walt and dislike Skyler. Zoller Seitz (2013) maintains that the phone call controversy is really about the relationship between viewers and television series, and sheds light on what people watch and

what this says about them. Mittell (2013) adds that “[Walt] is also calling to implicate the viewers, showing us the monster that we have been rooting for (at least up to a point), and particularly portraying the ugliness and bile frequently spouted by the Skyler-hating contingent of *Breaking Bad* fans – the series is saying, ‘this is what you sound like,’ with as much strong condemnation possible without going so far as to break the illusion of fiction.” *The New Yorker* critic Emily Nussbaum (2013) even went as far as to suggest that most fans watch *Breaking Bad* wrong and argues that the phone-call scene is thus “trolling” these “bad fans” who tend to ignore the fact that Skyler is abused by Walt. Despite these opinions, the episode’s writer Moira Walley-Beckett debunks further readings of that particular scene by telling *Vulture*: “I personally feel like it wasn’t open to interpretation. I would hope that people got that it was an absolute ploy on Walt’s part” (Martin 2013).

The preceding passages show that Skyler is not just a victim of her husband’s decisions but also suffers the consequences of her own choices. She undergoes a character transformation similar to Walt, changing from law-abiding citizen to criminal accomplice. Jen Chaney (2013) argues, “What bothers [fans of the show] is a certain hypocrisy they detect in [Skyler], stemming from the fact that she objects to Walt’s meth business – an objection that finally convinced him to quit cooking – yet continues to potentially benefit from all that dirty money.” In that sense, Skyler White is not so different from other television wives.

Jonathan Anderson (2013) explains, “Carmela [Soprano] has had more than her fair share of opportunities to turn her back on the life she has chosen and gain redemption, but she’s always bottled it. In Series Three she takes a leaf out of Tony’s book and visits a shrink of her own but is horrified when he lays it out straight for her. He implores her to take the children, leave the blood money behind, and get out of the marriage immediately if she ever wants to be at peace with

herself. Ultimately it is a warning she ignores.” Similarly, Skyler ignores the warning of her divorce lawyer to sue her husband for divorce immediately. “Let me go to the police,” the lawyer argues. “This is a no-brainer.” However, like Carmela, Skyler chooses to ignore the lawyer’s suggestions: “I can’t see why I should lay all this on my family when things may resolve themselves on their own” (“I.F.T.”). Anderson (2013) further adds, “It’s quite clear that Carmela is not evil, she is not a killer. She is incredibly materialistic, she is torn by her love of her children and she is a product of a lifetime living the life she has led. . . . The real issue with Carmela is that she is 100% conscious and aware of all this, yet through it all, she continued to carry on regardless. That is Carmela Soprano’s crime.” Like Carmela, Skyler is not as dark as her husband. She regrets that she caused Ted’s accident and even suffers a mild depression. Although Skyler is new to the life as a criminal accomplice, she is also conscious and aware of enabling her husband’s drug business and nonetheless continues to carry on and to launder his drug money. James Pniewozik (2013) maintains that disliking television wives such as *The Walking Dead*’s Lori, *Boardwalk Empire*’s Margaret, *Mad Men*’s Betty Draper, and others does not make anyone sexist. He states, “Part of what makes a *Breaking Bad* or *The Sopranos* brilliant is that they interrogate the idea of complicity and enabling crime, in a way that nods to the small moral compromises everyone makes in life. In its way, treating Skyler as a saintly martyr would deny the strength of her character (and Gunn’s outstanding performance)”

Gunn (2013) suggests that Skyler and Walt are equals. If Walt and Skyler are equally sharp, resourceful, and manipulative, and both characters share an extraordinary sense of family this then begs the question why viewers then favor Walt over Skyler if they are so similar. Gunn’s (2013) assertion that “Skyler [is] multilayered and, in her own way, morally compromised. But at the end of the day, she hasn’t been judged by the same set of standards as

Walter” is true to a certain extent. Although Gunn finds the problem to be rooted in viewers’ dislike of strong, non- submissive women on television, I argue that it is the show’s premise and overall concept that prevents viewers to connect with Skyler’s character. *Breaking Bad* is a male-centered drama that primarily follows the story of Walter White. Walt is the show’s main character and the viewers are asked to sympathize and support him. Silpa Kovvali (2013) states, “While Vince Gilligan and Anna Gunn have both publicly expressed shock that the character of Skyler White has inspired vitriol among viewers, Gilligan elsewhere acknowledged that Walt’s wife was originally presented less as a fully formed character than as yet another stressor to remind Walt of his impotence and weakness.” Right from the beginning of *Breaking Bad*, Gilligan introduces Skyler as unsympathetic to what Walt is going through and as an obstacle for him. Therefore, “you simply can’t ask an audience to root both for the anti-hero and the character trying to hold the anti-hero in check” (Rowles 2013). Paul Herskovitz (2013) asks whether viewers would still root for Walt if the roles were reversed; if Skyler was a chemistry genius who starts a drug empire and Walt would work part time and be a stay at home dad, would we still dislike Skyler? He maintains, “The answer is no. This whole issue of people disliking Skyler because she is a woman is wrong. It’s that fact that the main character’s enemy is the person closest to him, not gender.”

Although Skyler is potentially Walt’s equal and undergoes a similar transformation from good to evil, viewers are not permitted the same insight into Skyler’s character. Megan Cox (2013) maintains that Skyler’s internal conflicts are never fully explored, which makes it difficult for viewers to empathize with her. She states, “Her transformation (along with Walt’s) is one of the most fascinating parts of the show, but it’s not explored deeply enough. Instead, her actions always feel more like reactions as she deals with the life that her husband has chosen” (Cox

2013). More than being an antagonist, Skyler is a foil for Walt. Therefore, Gilligan's statement that viewers who dislike Skyler are misogynists could be seen as hypocritical because he created an engrossing male-centered drama that challenges viewers to like and care about its criminal male protagonist. Consequently, Gilligan should have expected the audience to treat any adversary of this protagonist – male or female – with animosity. For example, Jesse's parents in the show are not necessarily bad people. It could be argued that they only want what is best for their son and in their own way try everything they can to get Jesse off of drugs. Despite this, we cheer for Jesse when he buys his aunt's house behind his parents' back and throws them out, because we sympathize more with his character and dislike any of his adversaries. If Skyler had been the show's main protagonist, it could be argued that viewers would have liked her more than Walt. For viewers to care equally about Skyler and Walt, Skyler's character should have been explored in more detail and should have given viewers a reason to empathize with her character.

Amanda Lotz (2014) further maintains that Skyler serves mostly as Walt's adversary because Gretchen Schwartz is Walt's true love (98-99). Through flashbacks, the series implies that Walt left his girlfriend Gretchen and handed in his resignation at his former company Grey Matters, which he co-created with his friend Elliot Schwartz, because of Skyler's pregnancy. Gretchen later married Elliot and the company became immensely successful. Lotz (2014) thus interprets Walt's relationship to Skyler as a flirtation that became serious by accident and caused Walt to give up his dream and instead pursue a steady career as high school chemistry teacher in order to support his family. Therefore, Lotz's (2014) view that Skyler serves as a placeholder for Gretchen supports the idea that her character was mainly created as a foil to Walt. However, I maintain that Skyler is Walt's true love and that he most likely left Gretchen for a life and a

family with Skyler. If Walt would still pine for Gretchen, he would have taken up her offer to pay for his treatment and thus used their financial entanglement as a reason to get closer to her and to eventually rekindle their relationship behind Elliot's back. Despite this, Walt's main motivation at the beginning of the series is to be able to provide and take care for his family even after his death. Moreover, Skyler is the only person in the show with whom Walt has an honest conversation. In the final episode, Skyler warns him, "If I have to hear one more time that you did this for the family ..." Walt for the first time opens up and lets her see his true self by saying, "I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it. And I was really – I was alive" ("Felina"). The flashback scenes with Gretchen thus serve as nostalgia and reveal what might have been possible at some point in Walt's life. What if Walt had stayed at the company and married Gretchen? For Walt, it is not so much about his lost love Gretchen but about the fantasy to be Elliot Schwartz. He is yearning more for Elliot's life than for his friend's wife. Walt desperately wants to be like his friend: respected, successful, and wealthy. However, this too establishes Skyler as Walt's foil because she is holding him back on his way to achieve his goal to trump Elliot by building an empire similar in size and wealth, yet on the opposite side of the law.

As a result, I argue that viewers' dislike towards Skyler is not misogynistic but proof of Gilligan's ability to create compelling and multifaceted characters in a credible story world, as well as Anna Gunn's and Bryan Cranston's extraordinary character performance. Lotz (2014) asserts, "Women, wives, and feminism are never constructed as in any way responsible for the situations with which the men contend. Rather allocation of blame can be identified in the complicated relationships with an anger the men express toward their fathers" (84). Walt's memory of his father's surrender to his untimely death strengthens Walt's will to fight and is the cause for his relentlessness in achieving his goals. Therefore, Skyler is neither the reason nor the

focus point of Walt's anger and frustration, but merely serves as another obstacle on his way to masculinity. However, Lotz (2014) links the marital failure to the wife's disapproval of her husband's illegal actions (71). She argues that women in male-centered dramas are far from being passive. She explains, "... all the characters struggle with balancing individual desires, needs, or duties with their role in the partnership" (73). Both Skyler and Walt put their family first and want what is best for their children. However, they have very different viewpoints on how to protect their children and to give them the best life possible. The significance of male-centered drama's emphasis on men's portrayal in the domestic sphere draws attention to a double standard that men should be both the family's provider and caring fathers who share parental duties. Lotz (2014) states, "Many aspects of [men's] struggles with the range of masculinities available to them resonate with challenges depicted for women in recent decades over how to choose among newly available femininities and gender scripts" (114). She further explains:

Their difficulty in 'being men' indicates a masculine identity crisis that derives, at least in part, from difficulty merging newly valorized aspects of masculinity, such as paternal involvement and nonpatriarchal marital relations, with residual patriarchal masculinities that require great responsibility of men for familial provision. The men believe in equitable partner relationships yet are unable to free themselves of a sense that they alone must bear the burdens that lead them to seek illegal solutions (84).

Thus, it is significant that at one time the reigning drug kingpin Gus confided in Walt: "A man provides. When you have children, you will always have family. They will always be your priority, your responsibility. And a man, a man provides. And he does it even when he's not appreciated, or respected, or even loved. He simply bears up and he does it. Because he's a man" ("Más").

Masculinity Through Money and Power

In her article for *Wired*, Laura Hudson (2013) argues that money and masculinity are profoundly connected by *Breaking Bad*. She states, "Not only does money signify the value of

the person who earns it, but also the control and self-sufficiency that come along with it.” At the beginning of the series, Walt’s financial situation is less than desirable. His salary as a high school chemistry teacher is barely enough to support his disabled son and newly pregnant wife. To supplement his income Walt works part-time at a local car wash. Early into the series it is established that neither his students nor his employer respect Walt and he is frequently humiliated and exploited. Additionally, his family does not value Walt; Hank often tells macho jokes at his expense and Skyler admonishes him for his money use. In the pilot she asks Walt, “Did you use the MasterCard last month? Ah, \$15.88 at Staples?” He replies, “Um ... oh, we needed printer paper,” to which she responds, “Walt, the MasterCard’s the one we don’t use.” Although Skyler keeps track of their finances, Walt is the family’s sole provider. After his cancer diagnosis Walt especially carries the weight of this financial responsibility on his shoulders. Therefore, he initially keeps his cancer a secret from his wife and children.

Once his family comes to know about Walt’s health condition it is implied that they do not believe that he is able to handle the situation because of his medical and economical circumstances. Hank assures Walt that he will take care of his family, Walt Jr. tries to help Walt by accepting donations through a web page created in his dad’s honor, and Skyler asks their wealthy friends Gretchen and Elliot to pay for Walt’s cancer treatment. However, Walt refuses their help because he “would literally rather die than accept charity, because taking money from Gretchen and Elliot would somehow make him feel like less of a man” (Hudson 2013). The patriarchal concept that a man must provide for his family at all times is one of *Breaking Bad*’s central questions. Therefore, Walt decides not to pay for cancer treatment but to rather give their savings to his wife and children. When Skyler calls the family together for an intervention we can observe how deeply rooted the patriarchal belief of men as providers is within the world of

Breaking Bad (“Gray Matter”). For example, Marie asserts that it is Walt’s right to choose to do whatever he determines is best. Her macho husband Hank serves as the epitome of masculinity and thus her statement supports the notion of patriarchy. Furthermore, Hank maintains: “Maybe Walt just wants to die like a man,” to which Skyler replies: “I don’t want him to die at all!” Moreover, Walt Jr., who cannot yet fully understand the burden of Walt’s financial responsibility, interprets his father’s decision not to go into chemotherapy as cowardly and selfish.

As a result, this scene explores Walt’s struggle in “being a man” by highlighting a social construct of masculine identity that is almost impossible for men to accomplish. Although Walt has an equitable relationship with Skyler and shares parental responsibilities with her, he cannot escape the social expectation that he alone must bear his family’s financial responsibility. Therefore, Markus Gerke (2013) argues, “Despite shifts in the gender order, our society still expects men to take on the role of the provider and rewards those men who can, while shaming those that cannot. It is no surprise then that Walter White would make a desperate if illegal final attempt at living up to this standard, given that he appears to be running out of time.” Amanda Marcotte (2011) further states that it is the conflict of powerful men running into walls created by the limits of traditional masculinity that draws viewers to their television screens. Much of *Breaking Bad*’s emphasis is thus put on Walt’s effort to become self-sufficient and to reclaim control over his body, his financial situation, and also his family.

“Chemistry is the study of change,” White tells his students, “Electrons change their energy levels; molecules change their bonds; elements combine and change into compounds. That’s the cycle of life: it’s solution and dissolution. It is growth, then decay, then transformation. It is truly fascinating” (“Pilot”). Similarly, Walt undergoes a transformation into his alter ego

Heisenberg after the cancer afflicts his body. With nothing to lose but much to gain, he applies his own scientific genius to illegal actions. His nearly pure meth product soon defies the typically impure products of the local drug market, disrupting business. Walt faces hardened criminals and drug kingpins and eventually becomes a self-made man, quickly building a meth empire. David Sirota (2013) describes Heisenberg's ascension as an American Dream narrative on which our very definition of manhood is based on. Additionally, David Mayeda (2013) explains that becoming Heisenberg allows Walt to reclaim masculine characteristics within a patriarchal society. Mayeda maintains, "[Walt] eventually earns more than enough money to provide for his family ... and he holds so much power that he overrides virtually anyone who gets in his way, and does so very decisively, often violently." However, Silpa Kovvali (2013) argues the masculinity of *Breaking Bad* promotes "standards to die by, not to live by." Thus, *Breaking Bad* opens up a discourse on male representation on television that emphasizes how men are bound to and limited by social constructions of masculinity.

Breaking Bad's success story of the chemistry teacher turned multi-millionaire meth cook has often been analyzed by business publications such as *Forbes* and *The Economist*. Walt's economic situation at the beginning of the series especially draws connections to the financial crisis in 2008 and to debates about America's health care system. Mayeda (2013) asserts, "*Breaking Bad* first premiered in January 2008, shortly after America kick-started the global financial crisis. Millions of Americans – and even more globally – were facing unexpected, uncertain, unfair and uncontrollable economic perils. What so many of us felt on a personal level, we could see symbolically on a more extreme level in Walt – the model citizen who did everything right for his family, but who was given a raw deal in life, and stuck in an unhelpful economic system." Viewers of *Breaking Bad* can relate to Walt because of this connection.

Although highly educated and capable as a scientist, Walt still must work at two demeaning jobs to provide for his family. Gray Matter, the company that he co-founded with his friend Elliot, became immensely successful after Walt took his leave. Therefore, Walt feels cheated and envious. In *The Economist*, Schumpeter (2013) writes, “*Breaking Bad* ... takes place in a recession-ravaged America where most people are struggling to get by on stagnant incomes but a handful of entrepreneurs live like kings.” As a result of Walt’s economic back-story that reflects the contemporary American society at that time, viewers empathize with Walt’s decision to “break bad” and cook crystal meth.

While Sam Shank (2013) does not advocate illegal drug organizations, he describes Walt as a prime example of a strong startup founder. Shank argues that Walt not only created an innovative product and built a brand name, but he also committed to a goal and dreamed big. Despite these initial qualities, Walt’s goal changes over the course of the series. Walt’s early motivation was to make enough money to support his family for some years after his death. He tells Jesse, “\$737,000, that’s what I need. That is what I need. You and I both clear about 70 grand a week. That’s only ten-an-a-half more weeks. Call it eleven. Eleven more drug deals and always in a public place from now on. It’s doable. Definitely doable” (“Grilled”). However, Walt finds himself at a turning point when drug kingpin Gus offers him \$3 million dollars for three months of cooking meth. Walt first hesitates: “I have money. What I don’t have is my family” (“No Más”), but he later changes his mind and accepts the offer. Similar to his cancer, Walt’s greed for money and power grows throughout the series; it goes into remission only to resurface again. As time goes on, it becomes apparent to Walt that money is synonymous with power and masculinity. Walt thus seizes the opportunity to build an empire of his own similar to Gray Matter. Therefore, Vijith Assar (2013) argues in *The New Yorker*, “Money and power are

[Walt's] addictions. Love of family is what he uses to justify his crimes." Walt's momentous greed seems to be echoed when Todd tells his uncle Jack after eventually stealing all of Walt's money, "No matter how much you got, how do you turn your back on more?" ("Granite State").

By the end of the series, Walt is completely consumed by his need to make more money. For him, money guarantees he and his family their safety. Moreover, it represents his accomplishments and endeavors. When Walt defeats former drug kingpin Gus and takes over his position, Skyler pleads: "Walt, please, let's both of us stop trying to justify this whole thing and admit you're in danger!" However, Walt replies: "Who are you talking to right now? Who is it you think you see? Do you know how much I make a year? I mean, even if I told you, you wouldn't believe it. Do you know what would happen if I suddenly decided to stop going into work? A business big enough that it could be listed on the NASDAQ goes belly up. Disappears! It ceases to exist without me" ("Cornered"). This scene illustrates how his family perceives Walt in contrast to his workplace. That Walt measures the importance of his work and his persona by the amount of money that he earns proves Hudson's (2013) earlier argument that money in *Breaking Bad* signifies a person's value, control and self-sufficiency. Writing in *Forbes*, Allen St. John (2013) claims, "In the endgame of *Breaking Bad*, money is also about power. At least if you rule the money, rather than letting it rule you."

However, money does not only represent Walt's/Heisenberg's success; it is ultimately his downfall. In *CNN Money*, Chris Isidore (2013) estimates that Walt made approximately \$80 million dollar profit in less than a year and explains that it is a realistic income for a drug kingpin. Walt becomes an addict not to the drug he creates but to the money that his product earns him. Eventually, money and its power and masculine status become more important to Walt than his family or business partner Jesse. Whereas Jesse feels remorse and literally throws

his drug money out of his car window, Walt “heads out to the desert, and buries seven barrels of bills like a dog burying a bone” (St. John, 2013). Schumpeter (2013) explains in *The Economist* that

[Walt’s] biggest failing is also a common one in business: hubris. The more successful he becomes, the more invulnerable he feels. The more rules he breaks, the more righteous he feels. And the more wealth he accumulates, the more he wants. An impressive volume of social-science studies suggests that leaders are more willing to break the rules than followers. There is no shortage of corporate examples, from Enron to Olympus, to illustrate this. Walter White is a thoroughly odd character: Mr. Chips turned Scarface, as the show’s creator, Vince Gilligan, puts it. But he also holds a worrying mirror to the business world.

It is noteworthy that what finally draws Walt out and compels him to blurt out an honest confession about his crimes is not the fear for his family’s well-being, but the threat to burn his drug money. After teaming up with Walt’s DEA brother-in-law Hank, Jesse taunts Walt: “This is just a heads-up that I’m coming for you. I decided that burning down your house is nothing ... Next time, I’m gonna get you where you really live” (“Rabid Dog”). Jesse knows that taking away Walt’s money will destroy him. As St. John (2013) observes, “The man who was so calm about the prospect of Jesse setting fire to his house is out of his mind at the thought of him torching his money.”

Taking away Walt’s money also means to strip him of his newfound masculinity. As strong and powerful as he might have become, the money that Walt earns through his drug business is reminiscent of Achilles’ heel or Samson’s hair. Therefore, we could have expected Walt to be completely defeated by his one weakness. In contrast, it comes as a surprise that Walt is able to leave a fraction of his money behind for his family and thus to be able to die like a man by his own terms. Hudson (2013) maintains that although Walt is alienated from the people he loves most at the end of the series and receives no appreciation, respect, or love from them, he manages to live up to the traditional masculinity’s expectations and to support them financially.

She further claims, “Walt dies surrounded not by his failures but by his triumphs, by the chemistry he loves rather than the family he sacrificed, and with a smile on his face” (2013). As a result, *Breaking Bad* questions traditional masculinity’s concept of men as providers and it explores their potentially futile endeavors. Although it can be argued that in the end Walt achieves what he had set out to do, *Breaking Bad* also demonstrates that this accomplishment comes at a high price. Nonetheless, Gilligan explains in *Wired*, “As bad a guy as he has been, and as dark a series of misdeeds as he has committed, it felt right and satisfying and proper for us that he went out on his own terms. He went out like a man” (Hudson 2013).

CHAPTER IV: MASCULINITY AND THE POLITICS OF RACE IN *BREAKING BAD*

Nathaniel Hawthorne once remarked, “A hero cannot be a hero unless in a heroic world.” Likewise, anti-heroes in male-centered dramas are the product of their circumstances; a world characterized by shades of gray and uncertain morality that is infested with crime, substance abuse, disease, and unscrupulous businessmen is what Don Draper, Raylan Givens, Tony Soprano, and Walter White call their home. In that mode, Brett Martin (2013) argues that these male-centered dramas often revisit predominantly male genres, and adds, “Men alternately setting loose and struggling to cage their wildest nature has always been the great American story ... Our favorite genres – the western; the gangster saga; the lonesome but dogged private eye operating outside the comforts of normal, domestic life; the superhero with his double identities – have all been literalizations of that inner struggle, just as Huckleberry Finn striking out for the territories was, or Ishmael taking to the sea” (84). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that contemporary male-centered dramas situate their male characters in places as archaic, wild, and unpredictable as the anti-hero himself.

The Importance of Albuquerque

When we look at earlier male-centered dramas, we can denote a preference for urban spaces: *The Shield* is set in Los Angeles, *Rescue Me* and *Mad Men* both take place in New York City, *Dexter* is located in Miami, *House of Cards* is set in Washington D.C., and both *Boardwalk Empire* and *The Sopranos* take place in urban parts of New Jersey. Like their male predecessors in gangster sagas and film noir, these men inhabit asphalt jungles in which men compete in a ruthless struggle for survival. Conversely, male-centered dramas with pronounced relations to western films often take place in rural areas reminiscent of untamed nature, fitting with David Lusted’s (2003) argument that “the wilderness is a sphere for masculine action” (32). For

example, *True Detective* is set in Vermilion Parish, Louisiana, *Justified* starts out in Miami but later relocates to Harlan, Kentucky, and *The Walking Dead* begins in Atlanta and then moves to the surrounding countryside of northern Georgia. The male characters of these series not only evoke the classic image of the gunslinger with their behavior but also in their outer appearance; Deputy US Marshall Raylan Givens of *Justified* and Sheriff's Deputy Rick Grimes of *The Walking Dead* wear the iconic cowboy hat, belt buckle, and boots, and they are quick to draw their gun.

Breaking Bad differentiates itself from the aforementioned series by combining tropes of the gangster sagas, film noir, and the western genre, spending equal amounts of screen time in Albuquerque, New Mexico and its surrounding deserts. Scenes taking place in the city are more reminiscent of mob stories and revolve mostly around Walt and Jesse's interactions with the DEA and other criminal characters, and likewise, scenes set in New Mexico's desert evoke western films by focusing on Walt and Jesse as outlaws, their secret meth production, and violent encounters with the Mexican drug cartel.

Vince Gilligan states that crime movies and western films, especially spaghetti westerns like Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), serve as inspiration for *Breaking Bad* (Rosenberg 2011). Tropes of the western genre permeate the narrative and character relations of the series. For example, Walt's relationship to Jesse is comparable to Ethan's (John Wayne) relationship with Martin (Jeffrey Hunter) in *The Searchers* (1956), where Wayne plays an unexpectedly flawed and spiteful anti-hero. Walt and Jesse also steal from a train reminiscent of *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) and many subsequent western films. Moreover, *Breaking Bad's* production design and cinematography imitates the grand vistas of classic western films. In an interview with Jon Blistein (2014), Gilligan claims, "With giant, wide TVs, you get to frame and

emulate John Ford or Sergio Leone and, in the case of *Breaking Bad*, you can place characters in an endless expanse of Mexico prairie which gets to look very painterly and cinematic.”

Despite these aesthetic qualities, Gilligan did not have Albuquerque and its scenic surroundings in mind when he first pitched *Breaking Bad*. Gilligan told *Slant Magazine* that he originally envisioned Riverside, California, to be the show’s primary setting, but Sony persuaded Gilligan to change the location to Albuquerque because of a tax rebate of 25% on money spent within the state of New Mexico (Freñán 2010). Although *Breaking Bad*’s setting was mainly chosen because of financial reasons, Albuquerque’s close proximity to the Mexican border and the narrative significance for the Mexican drug cartel and meth consumption proved to be an effective element. In *The New Yorker*, Albuquerque writer Rachel Syme (2013) argues that *Breaking Bad* is organically bound to its location. She claims, “On television, Albuquerque still looks like the Wild West, a scorched, hazy, lawless place where rugged individualism might just tip over into criminal behavior at any moment – it’s not wholly inaccurate. ... Vince Gilligan, in speaking with Charlie Rose about relocating the show to Albuquerque, said that he could not possibly imagine the story without it, that all of the action spawned from the ‘postmodern Western’ spirit of the land.”

The Issue of Whiteness

Breaking Bad is unique in its realistic portrayal of Mexican culture, including the personification of death, La Santa Muerte, and the Mexican drug market. The episode “Negro y Azul” even featured an authentic narcocorrido – a traditional folk drug ballad – about Walter White. Gilligan states in *Slant Magazine*, “Our narcocorrido that we created for our show really was created by Pepe Garza, a music producer here in Los Angeles. We gave him the highlights of what the subject matter for the song should contain and the names and places. But if it’s an

authentic narcocorrido, we have Pepe Garza to thank, as well as the wonderful band that he found for us, Los Cuates De Sinaloa” (Freñán 2010). However, in an interview with Josh Gajewski (2009) for the *LA Times*, Garza describes the difficulty he experienced by bridging traditional Mexican culture with American television: “I felt the [corrido] audience wouldn’t quite identify with a song that had someone from a different nationality, named Heisenberg, beating the Mexican.” Thus, the ballad prophesizes Walt’s untimely death by saying, “The fury of the cartel / Ain’t no one escaped yet / But that homie’s dead / He just doesn’t know it yet.” However, it is not the Mexicans who cause Walt’s downfall, and despite *Breaking Bad*’s narrative ties to Mexican drug culture, there are in fact very few Mexican characters on the show.

Breaking Bad’s main cast is mostly comprised of white, non-Mexican characters. Walter White is the protagonist of the series and the story is told mainly from his perspective. Hence, the consequences of Walt’s crime and how they affect his immediate family and friends are at the center of attention. However, the major characters’ lack of interaction with people outside of their predominantly white world presents a stagnated insular community. Todd VanDerWerff (2013) argues that Albuquerque feels at times noticeably under populated, especially in the show’s first two seasons, adding, “People of color are barely represented in the series’ universe, even though Albuquerque’s population is nearly half Latino.” Although there are some recurring Mexican and Hispanic cast members, they remain underdeveloped and only function as disturbances of the main characters’ daily lives.

The non-white cast consists mostly of characters that are to some extent involved with the Salamanca family and the Juárez Cartel, a fictional drug organization with its headquarters in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, across the border from El Paso, Texas. In particular, the Salamanca family frequently disrupts the lives of Walt and his family. Tuco Salamanca is a crazed meth

addict and Mexican drug kingpin living in Albuquerque. He becomes Walt and Jesse's drug distributor in season one and two but is ultimately killed by DEA agent Hank ("Grilled"). Tuco's Mexican cousins, Leonel and Marc Salamanca (Daniel and Luis Moncada), are brutal, muscular hit-men who seldom speak and wear well-cut suits and cowboy boots with silver skulls. They come to Albuquerque in order to avenge Tuco's death but die in a shoot-out that leaves Hank badly injured ("One Minute"). Hector "Tio" Salamanca (Mark Margolis) is the head of the Salamanca family. He is a feared, high-ranking member of the Mexican drug cartel who lives in Albuquerque's retirement home Casa Tranquilla. Having suffered a stroke, Hector is bound to a wheelchair and can only communicate by tapping a bell. Although he is one of Walt's adversaries, he eventually collaborates with Walt to defeat their common enemy, Gus (Giancarlo Esposito), whom I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter. Jesse's girlfriend, Andrea Cantillo, and her son, Brock, appear as minor characters. The only non-white character on the side of the law is Hank's Mexican-American partner, Steven Gomez (Steven Michael Quezada), who appears in all five seasons and is one of the few characters to share a scene with almost every main character on *Breaking Bad*.

We are allowed glimpses into the lives of minor white characters such as Mike, Gale, and Jane, but are denied almost all background information about non-white characters. For example, we know about Mike's relationship to his granddaughter and we learn more about Gale's eccentric personality by seeing the inside of his apartment, yet we know little to nothing about Hank's partner Gomez, or the relationships within the Salamanca family, and most of Gus's life remains a mystery. In comparison to Jesse's previous white girlfriend Jane, who was an interesting, layered character, Andrea has no relevant back-story but exists merely to move the

story forward with her social connection to drug dealers. Hence, Mexican and Hispanic characters seem to blend into the background and are made less relatable to viewers.

Although the majority of non-white, male characters are portrayed as hyper-masculine, they are constantly defeated and dominated by other white characters in *Breaking Bad*. Richard Dyer claims in his book *White* (1997) that whiteness on screen is generally perceived as being the norm and thus he argues, “to think about the representation of whiteness as an ethnic category in mainstream film [and television] is difficult” (44). Despite this claim, he points to the fact that norms, too, are constructed (44). According to Dyer, whiteness is everything and nothing and “only non-whiteness can give whiteness any substance” (47), whereas the inverse is not the case. Therefore, I argue that it is *Breaking Bad*’s Mexican and Hispanic characters’ main function to offset and accentuate the white characters’ battles for superiority and masculinity.

For example, Hank repeatedly asserts his masculine superiority over his partner Gomez by telling racist jokes and denigrating Gomez about his Mexican roots. Additionally, Hank kills both Tuco and his cousins with remarkable skill. Although it might be argued that the violent confrontation with the cousins briefly strips Hank of his masculinity by binding him to a wheelchair, it nonetheless demonstrates Hank’s battle for physical dominance over these Mexican characters. Moreover, high-school dropout and junkie Jesse is sent to Mexico in order to instruct the Mexican drug manufacturers how to properly cook a nearly pure meth product (“Salud”). Most notably, Walt finds approval and recognition of his masculinity and chemistry skills once he enters the Mexican drug market, and among his Mexican counterparts he finally transforms into a more masculine, feared drug kingpin. In an article for *Salon Magazine*, Malcolm Harris (2012) claims that Walt brings class to the New Mexico meth scene. Indeed, Walt’s ability to move between upper, middle, and lower economic classes in his pursuit of

money and power is significant in *Breaking Bad*'s depiction of the drug business in general and the parallels between Walt and Hispanic drug kingpin Gus.

Walt and Gus: Los Hermanos

By comparing Walt and Gus, we can find many similarities that allow us to see them as different sides of the same coin. First, they are both fastidious men who value precision in their work. Additionally, Walt and Gus both expect undivided loyalty from their colleagues and like to be in control of their operations. Walt and Gus are husbands and fathers, and thus family is important to both men. However, it is Gus who reminds Walt about a man's job to provide for his family, even when the family does not reward him with recognition or love. Despite these parallels, it is the characters' crucial differences in their approach to business that ultimately sets them apart.

Although it can be argued that both men are reminiscent of the classic American self-made-man, they differ in their personal motivation and business management. Like other non-white characters, there is not much revealed about Gus's past, but a few clues that are dispersed throughout the series. Whereas Walt's main motivation is to amass enough money to provide for his wife and children after his death, Gus primarily seeks to defeat the Juárez Cartel in order to avenge the murder of his former protégé Max. In a flashback, we learn that Gus and Max wanted to enter into a deal with the Mexican drug cartel but that the cartel leader, Don Eladio, instead had Max killed by Hector Salamanca ("Salud"). Don Eladio warns Gus that he's not in Chile anymore but that he knows who he is and thus spurs his life. Hank eventually learns "Gustavo Fring" might be an alias and that there are no public records about Gus's life prior to 1986 ("Hermanos"). Hank suspects that Gus might have been affiliated with General Augusto Pinochet's regime in Chile ("Hermanos"). Moreover, it is hinted in "Salud" that Gus's

relationship to Max was more than simply a friendship and perhaps a romantic relationship. Although Gilligan remains non-committal on this interpretation, Giancarlo Esposito expressed interest in this idea. In an interview with Maureen Ryan (2011), Esposito states, “I think that in a deeper sense, it was a friendship, relationship, possibly lover relationship that some people may not understand. That is why it resounds so powerfully when he is taken away.”

As an Afro-Chilean immigrant, Gus is able to build a meth empire over the years and manages to keep trades with the Mexican drug cartel, despite the Mexicans’ distrust of South Americans. Having emigrated to first Mexico and then the US, Gus eschews most forms of violence and gradually takes over the meth distribution of the American southwest through his legitimate fast-food restaurant chain, Los Pollos Hermanos. Jeffrey A. Hinzmann (2012) argues, “Gus’s entire criminal enterprise is modeled much more on corporate business than most criminal endeavors” (104). Gus’s secret meth lab is a sterile and technically advanced chemistry lab that is safely hidden underneath a laundry facility, which belongs to a number of his smaller legitimate businesses. Moreover, Gus is involved in the community and even founded a chemistry scholarship at the University of New Mexico in Max’s name. According to Hinzmann, it is Gus’s discipline and caution that make him a good businessman, adding, “[Gus] doesn’t attract attention, he doesn’t lose control, he doesn’t arouse suspicion, and he doesn’t make mistakes” (105). Esposito explains, “[Gilligan] said it was about hiding in plain sight. Gus was affable and generous and would work to help people to be their best selves and bring them to prosperity. Gus was hiding from everyone, but he was hiding in plain sight, where everyone saw him as ambitious and community-minded and didn’t see the darkness in him” (Locker 2013).

Despite Walt’s sincere appreciation of what Gus has achieved, he eventually dismantles Gus’s business empire and supplants Gus as the regional drug kingpin. In the beginning of their

relationship, Walt sees in Gus a trustworthy, equal business partner. However, his admiration soon turns into envy and hatred when Gus wins Jesse's loyalty and undermines Walt's status as a genius chemist. Although it is established throughout the series that Walt lacks Gus's self-discipline and decorum, the white middle-class high school chemistry teacher not only defeats Gus but also takes over his business empire in less than a year. Unlike Walt, Gus had to go to great efforts in order to craft his façade in mainstream society. Additionally, it is significant that both Walt and Gus succeed to accomplish what they had set out to do. Gus is able to exert his revenge on the Juárez Cartel and Walt can provide for his family after his death. However, they both lose their families and have to pay with their lives for their undertakings. As a result, *Breaking Bad* could be seen as a social and cultural commentary on what it means to be a man. Despite the parity between Walt and Gus as businessmen, Gus's ultimate defeat by Walt emphasizes the series theme of race relations as well as the central narrative of Walt's rise to superiority and masculinity.

Is Breaking Bad a 'White Supremacist Fable' ?

The ease with which Walt assumes power in the drug business could be attributed to his whiteness. In contrast to Gus, he does not have to build a public image in order to fit into white middle-class culture. Gus had to invest more time creating an acceptable identity among the white middle-class, while at the same time building his meth empire. Already belonging to the white middle-class, it is thus easier for Walt to transition into and conquer the Mexican drug market. The DEA often expects the meth dealers' ethnicity to be Mexican, and Hank often labels Mexicans as the same. In "Bit by a Dead Bee" Hank jokes that all Mexicans are close-knit "homies," to which Gomez replies, "Tuco wasn't my 'homie' anymore than Charlie Manson was

yours.” Despite Gus’s acceptable identity, Hank is willing to look into his background and to bring him in for questioning, while he never expects Walt to be a drug kingpin.

As an unassuming chemistry teacher from suburban Albuquerque turned drug kingpin, Walt’s romantic takeover in the drug trade is accompanied by a conspicuously ambiguous portrayal of the sale and consumption of meth. In the first season episode, “A Crazy Handful of Nothin’,” Walt appoints Jesse as his liaison to carry out the drug deals:

Let’s get something straight. This, the chemistry, is my realm. I am in charge of the cooking. Out there on the street, you deal with that. As far as our customers go, I don’t want to know anything about them. I don’t need to see them. I don’t want to hear from them. I want no interaction with them whatsoever. This operation is you and me, and I’m the silent partner.

Although Walt eventually takes a more hands on approach to his work as he becomes increasingly possessive of his brand and product, *Breaking Bad*’s viewers have a generally privileged perspective of drug culture that focuses on one white man’s romantic rise and fall in an otherwise racially diverse, violent, and toxic industry. Like Walt’s aforementioned demand to be shielded from the more ugly parts of the drug business, *Breaking Bad*’s viewers are spared many unsavory details in favor of a whitewashed depiction of drugs (Harris 2012). A similar approach to soften content for viewers can be observed in *Dexter*, in which a white middle-class male blood-spatter analyst frequently outsmarts his African-American, Latino, and Asian counterparts on the police force by tempering with the evidence in order to capture and murder criminals. After Dexter traps his prey by quickly injecting precisely measured doses of a tranquilizer. When his victims awaken, they find themselves fully wrapped in cellophane and their surroundings completely covered in plastic sheeting. The actual act of killing is carried out emotionlessly with one swift stab to the victim’s heart. Although we know that Dexter relives his mother’s death by dismembering his victims, we only get to see Dexter dispose of neatly plastic-

wrapped packages into the ocean. Therefore, the series whitewashes Dexter's life as a serial killer in order to make it more palatable for audiences.

Whereas the investigative methods employed in *Dexter* are simplified for viewers unfamiliar with forensic analysis, *Breaking Bad* also whitewashes the drug trade by adapting it to a simple, relatable model for viewers. Harris argues that the drug market in *Breaking Bad* is more reminiscent of suburban farmers markets and pharmacies. He asserts, "The idea that people will always pay more for purer or small-batch products makes a lot of sense to demographics used to paying more for quality gimmicks ... but it doesn't make sense for the consumers *Breaking Bad* so sparingly depicts. When we do see [Walt's] ultimate customers, they're zombies: all scabs and eroded teeth. We're not talking about impulse buyers or comparison shoppers here; it's a textbook case of what freshman economics students call inelastic demand." Additionally, "[Walt] combines the ostensible moral complexity television audiences demand in a post-Soprano protagonist with a cleanliness that allows him to market expensive cars" (Harris 2012). Therefore, Harris concludes that the whitewashing of the drug business, as well as Walt and Jesse's apparent superiority to Mexican characters in class and skills, establishes *Breaking Bad* as a white supremacist fable.

Despite *Breaking Bad*'s premise of a would-be drug baron driven by social and economic forces, Gilligan does not perceive his series as a cultural critique. In *Slant Magazine* he explains, "We don't intend to make the show feel like a 'ripped-from-the-headlines' show a la *Law & Order*. This really is a story of a small set of particular characters, Walter White first and foremost among them. ... And all of this to say that I personally have no particular political or social axe to grind, because I think that stories that set out to do that become kind of didactic or

polemic. Stories about characters are always more interesting to me, personally. There is no deeper social indictment at work here, at least not consciously” (Freñán 2010).

Although Gilligan seems to deny a conscious critique of contemporary social and economic issues in *Breaking Bad*, I argue that its narrative of male characters struggling to be fathers and husbands, as well as their racial status in the white middle-class, comments on the conformity of traditional constructions of masculinity in today’s society. Despite this observation, I do not interpret *Breaking Bad* as an argument for white supremacy. In contrast to the narcocorrido prophesy that the Mexican cartel would be Walt’s demise, it is in fact Walt’s affiliation with white supremacist characters that leads to his downfall. Walt increasingly employs Jack’s gang of Neo-Nazis in order to do his dirty work. However, when Jack discovers a way to steal Walt’s money, he kills Hank and leaves Walt seemingly stripped of all his assumed masculine power. In the end, Walt learns from his misplaced trust and attempts to redeem himself. In a final shoot-out, a badly wounded Jack offers to reveal to Walt where they hid his money, but Walt kills him without hesitation because money and power are no longer important to him.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

By situating *Breaking Bad* in a larger context of male-centered dramas, it became apparent that the anti-hero trend fulfills a significant function for the representation of masculinity. These male characters continually break rules and question authorities, yet they are portrayed as anxious, flawed, and unassertive. With that, they offer a stark contrast to previous male characters in male genres like westerns and gangster sagas. On the one hand, this provides complex characters that seem more “real” and relatable to audiences. On the other, choosing anti-heroes also presents a platform to call male identity into question and challenge previous representations of masculinity on television. As a result, male-centered dramas interrogate and reconstruct masculine representations and they prove that masculinity on television is not unwavering and permanent, but needs to be probed and analyzed.

Breaking Bad serves as a good case study for male centered dramas because its male protagonist, Walt, exemplifies the anti-hero trend. By starting out with Walt as an unassertive father and high school chemistry teacher whose masculinity other characters constantly undermine, *Breaking Bad* invites its audience to invest in an underdog. Focusing on Walt’s transformation from an unassertive father and husband into the masculine drug kingpin Heisenberg, the series uses and at the same time challenges the hegemonic masculinity model.

My second chapter discussed the development of fathers on television and provided evidence that male characters strive to be good fathers but often struggle in that role. Furthermore, Walt’s responsibility as a father shapes his identity as a man in the world of *Breaking Bad*. The memory of his own father’s untimely death, as well as social expectations of a man to be a provider, compels Walt to break the law in order to secure his family’s future after

his anticipated death. Although Walt is trying to be a father, I argued that uncles and brothers are the real fatherly role models in *Breaking Bad*.

In the third chapter, I concluded that in his marriage to Skyler, Walt's masculine transformation is most visible through shifts in power relations. Over the course of the series, Walt becomes more dominant and tries to assert himself as the family's patriarch. By examining the character of Skyler, I also argued that viewer negativity toward her is not rooted in misogyny but is more likely a consequence of her function in the narrative as an adversary to Walt, who is the central protagonist. Finally, I provided evidence that money, power, and masculinity are essentially symbiotic in *Breaking Bad*. The more money Walt amasses, the more powerful and masculine he becomes. Losing the money is equated to a loss of power, and I concluded that because Walt is able to save some of the money by the end of the series he dies on his own terms, like a man.

In the final chapter, I established that *Breaking Bad*'s setting in Albuquerque, New Mexico, is integral to the narrative and provides a dramatic backdrop for economic and racial tensions. Furthermore, I argued that minor non-white characters mainly serve as contrasts and accentuate male white characters' masculinity and their assertions of superiority. Additionally, I argued that Walt's rise in the drug world romanticizes and whitewashes the drug market. This can be noticed in my comparison of Walt and his non-white counterpart, Gustavo Fring. Despite these observations, I concluded that *Breaking Bad* deals critically with the subject of white supremacy by showing Walt's defeat as the direct result of his alliance with Neo-Nazis.

With its representation of men as unstable, complex, and contradictory characters, *Breaking Bad* is a critique on the limitations and challenges posed to traditional masculine identities. Perhaps more than any other protagonist in male-centered dramas, Walt's turmoil

demonstrates that there is a problem with uniformly white, heteronormative representations of masculinity on TV. In Walt's constant battle between greed, guilt, and good intentions, *Breaking Bad* reveals that the expectations and struggles of male characters are more complex than previously acknowledged. Therefore, the series draws attention to the need for further research on male characters in this emerging television subgenre.

Considerations for Future Research

My thesis offers a basis on which further research on masculinity in television studies can be built upon. For example, if male-centered dramas continue to be popular, we may observe a shift from cable channels toward online streaming platforms, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime. The online streaming platforms "Big Data approach" to the creative development process, which measures audience engagement with content perhaps more accurately than focus groups, could accelerate the representation of complex male characters on television. Further research could explore the means and implications of that trend, which may challenge the traditional model of television program development which centers on show runners as auteurs. Additionally, scholars could investigate the role of Mexican and Latino characters in *Breaking Bad*, especially the character of Gus Fring and the implied rivalry between Mexicans and South Americans in the narrative. Also, further research could analyze the references to previously male-dominated screen genres, such as gangster sagas and western films. For example, a study could compare the relationship between Walt and Jesse to Ethan's relationship with Martin in *The Searchers* (1956) in more detail. Additionally, Hank's character arc could be examined in context with *Rear Window* (1954) and other masculine rehabilitation narratives as a postmodern detective story.

Finally, the controversial audience reception of Skyler White presents an opportunity to connect women studies with masculinity studies, and to analyze female representation in male-

centered dramas. A study of the audience backlash against Skyler could integrate with fan studies, and I thus plan to create a fan edit devoted to Skyler's experience in the narrative. During the process of writing this thesis, I resolved to experiment with what *Breaking Bad* would look like if it were told from Skyler's perspective. In my forthcoming fan edit, I will concentrate on her character and edit together scenes that portray her individual point of view. I expect it will be interesting to see whether viewers of this alternate cut empathize more with her character when they are provided with a different perspective.

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