

“Round the Decay of That Colossal Wreck”: Pride and Guilt in *Breaking Bad*¹

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Introduction: “I met a traveler from an antique land”

“Ozymandias”, the poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley, tells the story of the irremediable political decadence of leaders and the fragility of their empires, and it contrasts this with the indelible power of artistic works. The verses of the Romantic poet are central to the final season of *Breaking Bad*, both textually and paratextually. The most intense and devastating episode, 5.14., is named after the sonnet, and in the teaser for the final eight episodes Bryan Cranston recites Shelley’s poem to the backdrop of images of the New Mexico desert. This reinforces the parallels between Walter White/Heisenberg and the “King of kings” in the poem. Both characters are somewhat mythical, and are stimulated by an extreme sense of pride, for which they ultimately pay a high price.

Breaking Bad is a moral tale that describes the forging of an empire and an ordinary man’s loss of his scruples. The discovery of

¹ This article is based on a previously paper: Pablo Echart and Alberto N. García, “Crime and Punishment: Greed, Pride and Guilt in *Breaking Bad*,” in *A Critical Approach to the Apocalypse*, eds. Alexandra Simon-López and Heidi Yeandle (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2013), 205-217.

Walter White's cancer serves as a catalyst (a particularly appropriate chemical term) for him to reveal his true *inner self*. His "lung cancer is both plot device and metaphor,"² for a moral disease that affects a man (Walter), who sees himself enveloped by a diabolical cloak (his alter ego, Heisenberg).

The progressive moral and criminal decline of Walter White is spurred on by the contradictory tension between two radical emotions that become *rationalized* in order to justify his actions, which become increasingly less defensible: an intensifying pride and the guilt that fades as the narrative unfolds. These two emotions play a crucial role defining Walter White's last and deeply tragic actions, when "nothing beside remains." This emotional dynamic is not completely linear but rather, like a pendulum, it is constantly in motion, with these two emotions acting as opposing vectors that drive the transformations of *Walthernberg*.

In the first part of this article we will discuss pride as a force that drives the ever bolder actions of the *reborn* Walter and we will contrast this emotion with the parallel emotion of shame. In addition, we will analyze the self-delusions that differentiate Walter from his sidekick Jesse Pinkman, his obsessions, his false alibis and his narcissistic progression up to "Gliding All Over" (5.8.). In the

² Ray Bossert, "MacBeth on Ice," in *Breaking Bad and Philosophy: Badder Living through Chemistry*, eds. David R. Koepsell and Robert Arp (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2012), 77.

agonizing final eight episodes Walter White's actions continue to be driven by pride, and we observe the emergence of the darker facets of his identity, together with a weakness that serves to rehumanize him.

In the second part of the article we will tackle the theme of guilt in *Breaking Bad*, and we will compare Walter with both Skyler and Jesse Pinkman, two characters who despite supporting Walter in his criminal trajectory, deal with their own guilt in different ways. We will trace the amoral progression of Walter, from the frightened teacher of the pilot episode to the “sneer of cold command” with which he orders the murder of 10 witnesses in prison. However, as discussed in the final sub-section, the events of the final episodes of the series represent a return of the sense of guilt, leading to a perverse *happy ending* for the characters who revolve “round the decay of that colossal wreck.”

2. Pride as an engine and a tombstone: “My name is Ozymandias, King of kings”

In the academic literature on emotions, pride is considered an emotion with certain positive connotations, as it foments social action and self-improvement. For the timid Walter White presented in the pilot, repressed pride serves as the motor that incites him to turn his life around. As the episodes progress, this pride grows and begins to dominate Walter's motivations, turning into hubris. As

Lewis defines it, hubris is a “transient but addictive emotion” where people “seek out and invent situations likely to repeat this emotional state.”³ As we discuss below, the downward spiral in which Walter White finds himself seems to be propelled by an addictive, insatiable ego that creates excuses in order to grow continually. At the end of the story, the engine that drove his actions eventually becomes the tombstone that buries him. As in the myth of Icarus, Walter White flies too close to the sun (“Hazard Pay,” 5.3.).

2.1. Pride and the family alibi: “Look on my words, ye Mighty”

Throughout the series, Walter attempts to justify his descent into the world of drugs and his reprehensible actions with a mantra: the need to provide for the family. However, the viewer soon appreciates that this objective, which is in principle genuine, is actually consistent with the drive of Walter’s pride, which led him to reject the charity and to seek recognition.

The first season emphasizes the former. In addition to rejecting the economic aid offered by his in-laws to pay for his treatment (“Cancer Man,” 1.4.), his refusal to accept the succulent offer of employment made by his ex-partners, which would have enabled him to avoid any illegal activity to begin with, is fundamental: it is here

³ Michael Lewis, “Self Conscious Emotions: Embarrassment, Pride, Shame, and Guilt,” in *Handbook of Emotions*, eds. Michael Lewis, Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones, and Lisa Feldman Barrett (New York: The Guilford Press, 2010), 749.

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

Likewise, Walter experiences the pleasure of an ever-increasing narcissism. His virtuosity in chemistry and his intelligence earn him the reverential respect – on occasion accompanied by fear – of his rivals. From being a figure lambasted by the rest and by destiny, Walter begins to feel the pleasurable sensation of taking hold of the reins of his life, of “being in control,” as he states in front of another patient that is weakened by cancer (“Brothers,” 4.8.). Although money no longer becomes a need, Walter remains addicted to the business in which he can demonstrate to the rest of the world that his *artistry* is unsurpassable.

So, the ever more pathological personality of Walter demands public recognition, he needs others to be aware of his talent. This is what finally allows him to *become someone*. It is sufficient to compare the scene in the pilot where he hides from his students in the car wash with the excessive reassertion when confronted with some thugs at the end of the first part of the fifth season: “Now: say my name! [‘Heisenberg’, says the man] You’re goddam right!!” (“Say my Name,” 5.7.). This sentence shows how Walter has acquired an exaggerate pride—i.e. hubris.

It is the same arrogance that leads him to nearly give himself away in a police murder case (the assassination of Gale), as he can't tolerate that his genius and cooking craftsmanship is attributed to another chemist: "This... genius of yours. Maybe he's still out there," he insinuates to Hank ("Shotgun," 4.5.). Even Mike makes reference to Walter's pathological pride, situating it as the source of all his ills:

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

This same excessive pride conditions his relationships with the characters that surround him. Walter's relationship with Jesse is one of superiority in his position as a business partner, putative father and master chemist. This superiority results in a toxic, overbearing and belittling dynamic, with accusations such as "you are a pathetic junkie, too stupid to understand and follow simple rudimentary instructions" ("Down," 2.4.). It is in situations like this, when his pride is dramatically damaged, that Pinkman's rage emerges, to the

point that the couple come to blows on several occasions, most notably the violent confrontation in “Bug” (4.9.).⁴

During the first two seasons, the relationship between Walter and his family is strongly based on the other face of pride: shame. As catalogued by Tangney and Fischer, these are “emotions of opposite polarity”. At the outset of the story, Walter perceives how reprehensible his actions are, and consistent with the classical response to shame he “tries to hide or escape from the observation or judgment”⁵ of others, in this case that of his wife and son, because “when ashamed [...] we are clear about our sense of identity as a horrible, ugly, bad, or awful person.”⁶ As it turns out, and as Gilligan admits, Walter is a genius when it comes to deceit: “Walt’s superpower is that of being the biggest liar in the world. There is no better liar in the world of *Breaking Bad* and the person that he is

⁴ These sudden, violent impulses, which also characterize Walter, show that rage is the product of his shame. As Lindsay-Hartz, De Rivera and Mascolo write, “by putting another down, one [ashamed person] may attempt defensively to repair and in comparison raise up one’s shattered sense of self-worth.” Janice Lindsay-Hartz, Joseph de Rivera, and Michael F. Mascolo, “Differentiating Guilt and Shame and Their Effects on Motivation,” in *Self-Conscious Emotions. The Psychology of Shame, Guilt, Embarrassment and Pride*, eds. June Price Tangney and Kurt W. Fischer (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995), 296.

⁵ June Price Tangney and Kurt W. Fischer, “Self-Conscious Emotions and the Affect Revolution: Framework and Overview,” in *Self-Conscious Emotions. The Psychology of Shame, Guilt, Embarrassment and Pride*, eds. June Price Tangney and Kurt W. Fischer (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995), 10.

⁶ Lindsay-Hartz, De Rivera, and Mascolo, “Differentiating Guilt and Shame,” 295.

most capable of deceiving is in fact he himself.”⁷ Therein lies one of the big differences between Walter and Jesse; the latter maintains his moral compass and accepts evil as part of his identity, without self-deception: “I accept who I am: I am the bad guy,” he admits in “No Mas” (3.1.).

However, by the end of the second season two events occur that alter Walter’s self-image: Skyler discovers his continued farces; and his cancer temporally remits. Both these facts – intertwined with the rest of the story, as is logical – provoke a new psychological twist in Walter, and as is a norm throughout the series, his pride overrides the shame or guilt. As is the emotional leitmotif of *Breaking Bad*, Walter White rationalizes his emotions adapting them to the new scenario, yet always giving preference to his pride over other feelings. He again adopts what Williams and DeSteno call a “hubristic pride:” “[It] has no particular target and in essence is an unconditional positive view of one’s self as a whole that may lead to negative social consequences.”⁸ The zenith of this transformation (that in the fifth season will descend into domestic psychological terror) takes place in “Cornered” (4.6.) when Skyler doubts the physical integrity of her husband, accusing him implicitly of being weak. An irate Walter responds:

⁷ Emmanuel Burdeau, “En las entrañas de *Breaking Bad*,” *So Film* 01 (2013): 52. Translated by Mark Sefton.

⁸ Lisa A. Williams and David DeSteno, “Pride and Perseverance: The Motivational Role of Pride,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 94(6) (2008): 1008.

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

In this sense, Kuo and Wu defined a suggestive analogy between this character and Satan in *Paradise Lost*,⁹ and it is clear that Walter adheres to the phrase of Milton's Demon: "Better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven." But to reign in hell it is necessary to act with malice. Accordingly, the progressive dehumanization of the protagonist is driven by his exaggerated pride that, as the story unfolds, becomes released from all the moral constraints, becoming a remorseless man. However, this evil path is tempered in the last eight episodes.

2.2. Tempered pride and collapse: "Nothing beside remains"

While in "Fly," (3.10.) Walter describes a touching family scene as the moment he would have liked to die, two seasons later the highpoint of his life is presented in another domestic setting, this time in the final minutes of "Gliding Over All." On the Whites' patio, the six members of the family share a quiet meal. It could have been a happy ending for Walter: the domestic harmony and the tacit reconciliation with Skyler suggested when their eyes meet represents

⁹ Michelle Kuo and Albert Wu, "In Hell, 'We Shall Be Free': On *Breaking Bad*," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 13, 2012, accessed April 5, 2013, <http://lareviewofbooks.org/article.php?id=761&fulltext=1>.

for Walter a manifestation of completeness; he has left the “business empire,” has succeeded in providing for his family and has satiated his narcissistic ambition to be *recognized*. Moreover, at this point in the story he has no more enemies to defeat – the last witnesses were executed in prison –, the police do not suspect him, and his partners in crime, Mike and Jesse, are out of the game. The comfort and satisfaction felt by Walter in this moment of success, in which is presented as a happy father, contrasts with the flash-forward that opens the next episode (“Blood Money,” 5.9.), in which a gaunt Walter surveys his destroyed home.

Hank’s discovery in the bathroom deflates Walter’s ecstasy and will push him to use his pride as an effective mechanism of self-defense to avoid taking responsibility for the way in which the events have played out. Thus, the second half of the final season sees a return of the Jekyll and Hyde ambivalence between the open and remorseful Walter and Heisenberg, spurred on by the enemy and once again motivated by extreme pride. As in the verses of Walt Whitman (“Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain *multitudes*”), the internal schism to which the character is subjected is eloquently reflected in his paradoxical actions within the same episode. Thus, “Rabid Dog” (5.12.) begins with Walter threatening Saul when the latter suggests that Jesse should be killed – who consumed by guilt, could drag them all down – yet it ends with a 180° turn in events, with Heisenberg ordering Jesse’s execution. In a

moral reversal, in “Ozymandias” (5.14.) Heisenberg is capable of kidnapping Holly – the most precious of all things to Skyler, along with Walter Jr. – only to return her when he realizes that she misses her mother, evoking in him pity for both mother and daughter.

Consistent with the rest of the series, pride remains a driving force in the later stages of Walter White’s moral journey, reappearing towards the end of the series in response to his wounded ego and his desire to be immortalized. First, his wounded pride makes him a victim, demanding the empathy of the viewer necessary to create the conditions required to repair the damage, and encouraging him to act decisively one last time. Listening to the lies of his former partners (the Schwartzs’) on TV, Walter goes back on his decision to surrender to the police, and sick with both pride and cancer, he launches his final plan (“Granite State,” 5.15.).

Second, his pride also responds to Heisenbergs’ desire to perpetuate himself as a legendary figure: a criminal as feared as he was respected as a virtuoso drug alchemist. In one of the most exciting moments of the series, there is the physical confrontation between Walter and Hank, when Walter realizes that the police are on his trail and Heisenberg reveals his mythical dark side: “If you don’t know who I am, then maybe your best course would be to tread lightly” (“Blood Money,” 5.9.). In the season’s finale, “Felina”

(5.16), an offended Walter/Heisenberg finds added motivation¹⁰ for exacting revenge on Todd's gang when Badger and Skinny reveal that someone (Jesse) is cooking better methamphetamine than his. This professional vindication culminates in the smile on Walter's face at the moment of his death in the clandestine laboratory: satisfied that the bloody massacre that has just come to an end will ensure that Heisenberg will go down in history, given that his drug – his work of art – continues to be sought after on the streets while he remains a wanted man.

In the same way as the moments of greatest subjective happiness are domestic scenes, it is in the company of his family that Walter displays the remnants of his humanity, his vulnerability and his limitations, and he appears a meek, humble man who is not driven by pathological pride. Thus, the solitary breakfast with which he *celebrates* his 52nd birthday (“Live Free or Die,” 5.1.) – so far removed from the celebration with which the story began exactly two years previously – evokes compassion in the viewer, who feels Walter's nostalgia for the family he has lost.

The impotence induced by pride is particularly evident in “Granite State” (5.15.), in which a delusional Walter realizes that his pride and his desire for revenge contrast starkly with his limitations. One of the

¹⁰ This rivalry was first established in the fourth season, when Walter sees his leadership threatened and he begins to feel *expendable*. On that occasion, Walter – thanks to the cigarette spiked with ricin – succeeds in temporarily recovering Jesse's loyalty, until his guilt for the death of Andrew Sharp separates them again.

most important characteristics of the screenplay of the final season of *Breaking Bad* is the ongoing theme of reaping that which has been sown. This time it is used to show how dominant hubris has turned into pathetic impotence. In “Live Free or Die” (5.1.), an emboldened Walter threatened Saul Goodman: “We’re done when I say we’re done.” In the penultimate episode, he tries to repeat his bullying: “Remember what I told you, it’s not over, until ... “, but in mid-sentence he is overcome with a bout of coughing... “It’s over,” insists Saul.

In that same episode, Walter’s isolation intensifies in the snow-covered cabin in which he hides, the image itself a metaphor for his solitude. On his birthday, he gives a 100 dollar bill to the waitress who treated him with kindness, and in the cabin he is willing to pay 10,000 dollars to his benefactor for a mere hour of his company: as the poet wrote, “nothing beside remains.”

Moving beyond the impositions of external circumstances (illness, exile), the farewell to Skyler and Holly (“Felina,” 5.16.) illustrates the apparent paradox of the vicissitudes of Walter White: the actions supposedly undertaken for the good of the family have ultimately destroyed the family. However, that last visit home – or to the mirage of home, to be precise – allows Walter White, after months of solitude, to embark upon the final stage of his transformation. This represents a point of anagnorisis, of self-recognition. Walter finally accepts that his excessive pride and not the welfare of his family has

been the real impetus for his actions: “I did it for me. I was good in it. And I... I was really... I was alive.” To achieve a state of feeling *alive*, Walter White, as we examine below, had to gradually renounce that which lies at the heart of moral conscience: the feeling of guilt.

3. Guilt, from Mr White to Mr Lambert: “Stamped on this lifeless things”

From the outset, Walter White accepts the damage caused by his immoral actions (manufacturing drugs), both personal and social, with the excuse of doing so for the greater good: a prosperous and stable family legacy after his death.

The moral transformation of Walter White is subtle, gradual and not without setbacks. Consistent with the emotional dynamics at play throughout the series, moral conscience is particularly powerful in the earliest stages. Episode 1.3. (“And the Bag’s in the River”) is particularly significant. The story lingers on the moral dilemma that confronts Walter when faced with committing a crime. On a piece of paper he writes in the left column the reasons why he should not kill Krazy-8: “It’s the moral thing to do,” “He may listen to reason,” “post-traumatic stress,” “Won’t be able to live with yourself,” “Murder is wrong!,” “Judeo Christian principles,” “You are NOT a murderer,” “Sanctity of life.” In the right-hand column there is just one reason: “He’ll kill you and your entire family if you let him go” ... and the shards of a broken plate.

As the descent into hell that is *Breaking Bad* progresses, the left column shrinks. The line between remorse and shame becomes blurred, as Walter is gradually stripped of the two corrective premises on which guilt is founded: rectifying a wrong and preventing its recurrence.¹¹ Only in the last three episodes, when catastrophe is inevitable, does Walter try to restore the broken order, as we discuss below.

3.1. The birth of a Superman: “A sneer of cold command”

Breaking Bad can be understood as the story of a monster that is fighting to cast off his human mask. The challenge of the series lies precisely in the extent to which the viewer’s interest in the fortune of the character, who is ever more repulsive, can be maintained, and with whom the bond of a shared moral code is progressively lost. As the monster begins to take over, Walter’s pride begins to crush his sense of guilt. This is clearly evident through the brutal acts that he commits, more and more outrageous, and severe, and yet the chemistry teacher always finds a way to justify them.

The human qualities of Walter evoke certain compassion, such that the spectator can empathize with him: during the first season, the sick Walter is the victim, the loser, the man who has got less than he

¹¹ Lewis, “Self-Conscious Emotions,” 748.

deserves, the “identifiable suburban dad under enormous pressure”.¹² Furthermore, throughout the first two seasons, the murders are portrayed as products of Walter’s instinct for survival: kill (in self-defense) or be killed.

The big change comes later, not by chance, once his cancer remits and Walter demonstrates the strength of Heisenberg’s personality with that “Stay Out of my territory” that he bellows in the hardware store (“Over,” 2.10.). Soon later, in “Phoenix,” (2.12.) Walter lets Jane die despite there being no physical threat to his life (as with the earlier deaths). What is also interesting in this event is the contrast in the way it affects other protagonists: while Jesse’s sense of guilt becomes ever more apparent, Walter appears to be ever more immune to the moral consequences of his actions. This inertia is only questioned by Hank’s death, which, as discussed later, represents the transgression of the one forbidden frontier: the family.

Although progressive, Walter’s moral decline stalls at times. On several occasions he shows signs of acceptance of the evil in his actions, and as a consequence, on occasions he expresses strong remorse. This explains his enraged response to such good news as the remission of his illness (“Four Days Out,” 2.9.). Walter response is to cause himself pain (furiously smashing his knuckles in the bath)

¹² Alan Sepinwall, *The Revolution was Televised: The Cops, Crooks, Slingers and Slayers Who Changed TV Drama Forever* (New York: Touchstone 2013), 356-357.

and in that moment, we sense that he cannot support the guilt of all the pain he has caused. No longer can he argue that mitigating circumstances justify that what he does is for a greater good, in the light of his imminent death. This is the feeling that becomes explicit in “Fly” (3.10.):

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

At times like this, the more human Walter struggles to break through to the surface and overthrow his alter ego. As illustrated when Walter falls, defeated in his battle against a fly, his sheer physical weakness facilitates the eruption of guilt and recognition of the pain he has caused; the fly can be interpreted as a metaphor for the *contaminated* conscience that can never be fully purified. Something similar happens when, after being beaten, he breaks into tears before his son. However, having regained his composure after sleeping restfully, he admonishes Walter Jr. to erase from his memory the image of the vulnerability he displayed (“Health,” 4.10.).

That is the last time that Walter White considers any real alternative to his criminal life. However, a new turn at the end of the following episode (regarding the money that Skyler gives to Beneke)

forces him to again forge onwards, and as is by that stage becoming the norm, his pride, coupled to his survival instinct, supersedes any other moral consideration; for example, surrendering to the police and seeking witness protection. Another example of this ebb and flow between Walter and Heisenberg is seen towards the end of “Buried” (5.10.). Conscious of the dire situation in which he has placed Skyler, Walter agrees to surrender to the police only if she accepts the money he has gained. This time, it is Skyler who encourages her husband to keep going.

Although the character played by Anna Gunn is infected by Walter’s moral Machiavellianism (*e.g.*, her cynicism in lying to Marie about the origin of money, her cruelty regarding the DVD with which Walter incriminates Hank, her insistence on taking “full measures” against Jesse in “Rabid Dog”), her moral conscience is more robust and therefore, her guilt is more apparent. However, as much as she condemns her husband’s actions, she uses a similar justification for her actions: the family.¹³ Skyler is afraid of losing her children and feels ashamed for failing to report Walter’s crimes

¹³ One of the differences between the moral limits set by Skyler and Walter concerns Jesse. For Walter, this character is like a “son” and as such, he is always “off-limits”; he forms part of the family that cannot be touched. By contrast, Skyler has always seen Jesse as a stranger and thus, it seems reasonable to her to liquidate him in order to save her family (“Rabid Dog”, 5.12.). Finally, the ambush that Jesse and Hank set up for Walter at the end of the same episode leads Heisenberg to declare Jesse to be “dispensable”. Only in the final minutes of the series (in “Felina”) is a reconciliation they allowed, dramatized in a duel of close-ups that portray their last goodbye.

(including the shooting of Hank in “One Minute,” 3.7.). Only after Hank’s death will she be able to confront the tragic actions of her husband (“Ozymandias,” 5.14.), and accept the feelings of guilt and shame they provoke.

Substantial differences are also seen between Walter and Pinkman, who serves as an inverted mirror of Walter's guilt. Jesse never escapes from the weight of cyclical feelings of guilt. He does not recover from the depressive state triggered by Jane’s death until well into the third season. However, the plot puts him back against the ropes when he is forced to kill Gale. This crime drives his actions for much of the fourth season, culminating in his remorseful lament in “Problem Dog” (4.7.); unlike Walter, he is unable to forgive himself for the murder

The thing is, if you just do stuff and nothing happens, what's it all mean? What's the point? Oh right, this whole thing is about self-acceptance. (...) So no matter what I do, hooray for me because I'm a great guy? It's all good? No matter how many dogs I kill, I just, what, do an inventory and accept?

In fact, Jesse feels what Lacroix describes as “morbid guilt,”¹⁴ something that reaches its zenith in the latter part of the fifth season. Jesse is unable to get over the murder of the child with the tarantula. Walter himself warns: “Son, you need to stop focusing on the

¹⁴ Jean Lacroix, *Philosophie de la culpabilité* (Paris: PUF, 1977), 24.

darkness behind you. The past is the past. Nothing can change” (“Blood Money,” 5.9.).

According to Lindsay-Hart, De Rivera and Mascolo, “unresolved guilt may lead to continual attempts to restore the moral balance by ‘being good,’ punishing the self, giving up rights, performing actions that appear to be symbolic substitutes for making reparations, undoing a wrong, or making order out of disorder.”¹⁵ From “Blood Money” (5.9.) onwards, the character played by Aaron Paul adjusts his actions in response to this “unresolved guilt:” he collaborates with Hank to catch Heisenberg (restore balance), he falls for the umpteenth time into drug use and despair (self-punishment), he throws the money to which he has a *right* out the car window (giving up rights), and he delivers the rest of the money to the family of Drew Sharp (reparation). Moreover, as will happen to Walter, Jesse pays a heavy price for his sins, since he not only sees Andrea murdered, but he also spends months enslaved in a hellish basement. It is no coincidence that his emotional consolation is his dream of the Peruvian wood box that he swapped for an ounce of marijuana (“Kafkaesque,” 3.9.). It is a symbol of remorse for having done so much wrong that he now regrets, like an original sin from which he cannot escape.

¹⁵ Lindsay-Hartz, De Rivera and Mascolo, “Differentiating Guilt and Shame,” 289.

This sense of guilt makes him more human and enhances his empathy with the spectator, unlike Walter who morally becomes increasingly more distanced from the audience. In the third season, Mr White steps up a level by running over Gus Fring's two henchmen and orchestrating the liquidation of Gale. In the fourth season, he puts in danger a child (poisoning Brock) and an elderly lady (the neighbor that he uses to ensure the path is clear in "Face Off," 4.13.). Likewise, in the fifth season, as well as terrifying Skyler, shooting Mike¹⁶ and killing ten witnesses, his reaction to the death of the child on the motorbike is very significant: projecting along with Jesse a compassion that proves to be false when just moments later we see him whistling happily ("Buyout," 5.6.).

During the first part of the last season, Walter becomes a merciless and guiltless man, a superman – *Übermensch* in Nietzschean terms¹⁷ – capable of constructing his very own value system. He adopts what Heller labels as a "narcissistic conscience," where acts are differentiated from consequences: "In the case of narcissistic conscience, 'taking full responsibility' means to reject consciously all responsibility with conscience's usual cry: Here I

¹⁶ Again, the dichotomy between pride and guilt appears after this assassination: Walter realizes that he has allowed himself to be overcome by rage and begs forgiveness... yet it's already too late.

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), xviii.

stand and cannot do otherwise.”¹⁸ However, the last eight episodes point towards poetic justice where crime has a cost, narrating the fall of this “King of kings.”

3.2. The return of guilt: “Half sunk, a shattered visage lies”

The narcissist in Walter White is satiated psychologically in “Say my Name” (5.7.), and materially in “Gliding All Over” (5.8.), when Skyler shows him the gigantic pile of money he has earned. If the family is the only moral boundary that Walter’s conscience dares not cross, it is logical that his greatest regrets come after Hank’s murder in “Ozymandias” (5.14.).

But even at this point, Walter does not take full responsibility for Hank’s death but rather, he transfers this responsibility to Jesse in another example of how he engages in self-deception to continue believing that his actions are for noble and justified reasons. A common pattern in *Breaking Bad* is that Walter’s lowest moments – symbolized by that terrified look that begs for mercy over his glasses and the ground-level close-up of a man who has been morally destroyed, as in Shelley’s poem from which the title of the episode is taken – are accompanied by a violent resurgence of Heisenberg. In “Ozymandias,” this takes a particularly horrifying form, resolving one of the most intriguing situations in the series in a way that

¹⁸ Agnes Heller, *The Power of Shame: A Rational Perspective* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 38.

reinforces Jesse's guilt, while punishing him further: "Wait. I watched Jane die. I was there. And I watched her die. I watched her overdose and choke to death. I could have saved her. But I didn't." The constant tension between guilt and pride is reflected in the facial expression of *Walter* in this short dialogue: from a rictus of pain to absolute hatred. For this reason he does not hand himself in to the police after Hank's death but rather, he flees with a barrel of money, a new excuse to have a "fresh start" – a redemption that absolves all his sins – with his family.

The end of that crucial episode (5.14.) again emphasizes the emotional dichotomy that runs through the entire series. The final call is an attempt by Walter to exculpate Skyler. Walter knows that the police are listening to the conversation and thus, through his excessive rhetoric he seeks her complicity (Skyler, who in contrast to the opening sequence of the episode, has now learned to recognize her husbands' lies). After a few seconds, Skyler falls silent and plays along, coming across – in the eyes of the police – as a victim of her husbands' domestic violence. It is possible that Walter's disdain and anger contains traces of Heisenberg's pride (especially when he blurts out that she never thanked him for everything he has done "for this family"), yet in the end, Walter's tears reveal his feelings of guilt and the realization of the terrible damage he has inflicted upon those he loves most.

The events of the final two episodes confirm the marked resurgence of guilt, and the consequent remedial practices that accompany it. From his desperation and physical impotence in “Granite State” (5.15.), Walter ruminates on guilt for months, while at the same time designing a strategy to compensate for the damage caused to his family, and to avenge Hank; two ways to “repair the failure.” Accordingly, Walter seeks to restore the balance that he has upset, a common element of guilt: “The psychological situation of guilt involves a violation of the moral order, for which we take responsibility. The primary motivational instruction of guilt is the felt desire to ‘set things right,’ to restore the balance in moral order.”¹⁹

Walter White’s internal tension leads him to seek forgiveness by calling his son. Flynn’s absolute contempt for him (“Why don’t you just die already? Just die!!”), leaves Walter more broken than ever, to the point that he takes a step that he had not previously dared to take: calling the police to surrender. This reflects his acceptance of the consequences of his guilt, taking full responsibility for his actions; not only legally but with all the disgrace that this entails. And this is where, for the last time, the proud Heisenberg comes to the rescue of Mr White, and in an example of circular narrative, Grey Matter again acts as the catalyst for the latest action driven by his wounded pride.

¹⁹ Lindsay-Hartz, De Rivera and Mascolo, “Differentiating Guilt and Shame,” 289.

Thus, the series' finale ("Felina," 5.16.) shows us a protagonist in search of forgiveness *sui generis*: "The wish to alleviate the burden of guilt," writes Griswold, "is surely the most common and pressing motive for requesting forgiveness."²⁰ In an attempt to "set things straight," Mr Lambert (the new alias symbolizing the failure of both Mr White and Heisenberg) returns to Albuquerque, his actions guided by a mixture of justifications derived from both guilt and pride, and hence his unusual apology.

Once again during the celebrated conversation with Skyler the contradictory personality of the protagonist is displayed. Walter White accepts his wickedness, his hubris, his alter ego (Heisenberg): "I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it. And I was really... I was alive". The phrase, which in some way defends his criminal self, also contains features that Griswold²¹ attributes to a genuine apology (born of guilt). Walter takes responsibility: he no longer uses the family as an excuse; he recognizes the evil of his acts, revealing the whereabouts of the bodies of Hank and Gomez; he changes his attitude and condemns his actions, since he recognizes his enormous ego as the engine driving his actions; and he agrees not to repeat the offense, as he has returned to say goodbye and to disappear from their lives forever.

²⁰ Charles Griswold, *Forgiveness: a Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 52.

²¹ Griswold, *Forgiveness: a Philosophical Exploration*, 56.

To close the circle of guilt, Walter still accepts the ultimate price of his crimes: that of his own life. As before,²² Walter punishes himself and sacrifices himself to save Jesse, even asking Jesse to pull the trigger. The paradox of the ending – a perverse *happy ending* – is that it satisfies the aspirations of the two emotions that since the outset have battled within him, and that characterize the psyche of Walter Hartwell White.

4. Conclusion: “Round the decay of that colossal wreck”

The ending of *Breaking Bad* stresses the parallelism with Shelley’s “Ozymandias:” the colossal personal, familiar and moral shipwreck of the protagonist co-exists with the legend of the blue meth. The teardrop that Walter sheds before dying accompanies a smile of satisfaction with his *Baby Blue*. It is this ambiguity that makes the ending (*traditional* and generally predictable) so satisfying. *Breaking Bad* restores order... a moral order at least. Good, although somewhat battered, still stands tall, and the line that separates it from Evil is clear. The criminal has confessed his sins and now assumes his guilt, ultimately trying to amend the evil done.

Similarly, Jesse has paid his penance for all the pain he has caused. He achieves physical release by choking Todd, yet inner

²² In the pilot he tries to shoot himself... but there is no bullet in the chamber of the gun; in “Four Days Out” (2.9.) he smashes up the bathroom of the hospital; and in “Fly” (3.10.) he feels remorse for not having already died.

freedom requires that he forgives. Thus, by not shooting Walter White, Jesse fulfils two goals. From the emotional point of view it allows him to escape from the toxic relationship, dominated by Walter, because this time, unlike with Gale, he ignores Walter's command to "do it." In addition, from the moral point of view, Jesse shows compassion by not shooting Walter, thereby, to some extent, forgiving him.

Furthermore, if *Breaking Bad* is the titanic struggle of a man against himself, the ending manages to square the circle by reconciling the bloody vengeance of Heisenberg with the Christian sense of guilt of Walter White: he pays the price for all the evil done (he will not see his daughter grow, his wife and son hate him, his brother-in-law is dead and even he will perish) while attempting to amend the same evil. Walter accepts his penance, however painful it may be. There is no home to return to, all that remains is to die doing one last good deed to find peace with himself ("I just needed a proper goodbye," he explains to Skyler). Skyler actually minimally accepts his apology, as illustrated by the way she stays her hand as Walter leaves the frame... but Walter Jr. will never forgive him.

And this is where the proverbial ambiguity of the series allows a final *tour de force*: the defeat of Walter, his death, constitutes the final victory of his alter ego. The legend of Heisenberg, who so lovingly contemplates the laboratory of his dreams, will grow ever greater with the discovery that he was cooking in Albuquerque while

he was the most wanted criminal in America. He will die. But his name, and his sated ego, will live forever in memory.

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