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COM 320 Section 001

28 September 2019

*Breaking Bad* Making Good

Family, cancer, and methamphetamine. That, essentially, is *Breaking Bad*. Though of course, there is much more to it than that. The television series first aired in 2008 and concluded after five seasons. *Breaking Bad* tells the story of Walter White, a husband, father, and high school chemistry teacher, who finds out that he has cancer. Unable to afford the necessary treatment on a teacher's salary, Walter turns to his knowledge of chemistry to cook chemically perfect meth and subsequently sells it for profit to provide for his treatment and his family. The drama in *Breaking Bad* comes from the many obstacles Walter faces as a result of his new line of work. This paper will use *Breaking Bad* as a basis to explore American culture, as implicit in two scenes specifically and the series generally.

Though it would be easy to pick apart any scene in *Breaking Bad* for its vast number of cultural implications, the first scene I'd like to discuss occurs in season two, episode one. The scene depicts two locations and experiences occurring in parallel, tied together by a phone call. While in the basement of his meth lab, Walter receives a phone call from his brother-in-law Hank, who is at a crime scene in his role as a Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent. Hank laughs while describing the scene to Walter – two dead, bloody bodies in a junk yard – and he takes pictures of and with the bodies. Generally, Hank is being what most people would consider disrespectful. When Hank sends a picture of the two bodies to Walter, Walter quickly recognizes them as the two drug dealers he had dealt with earlier in the day. Walter realizes that

if drug lord killed his dealers, Walter and his family could be next. The phone call is quickly ended as Walter grabs a gun, leaves his meth lab, and races home to protect his family (Gilligan, 2009, 37:00).

When I saw this scene for the first time, the behavior that Hank exhibited in relation to the dead bodies unsettled me, but I did not think much of it. Armed with the knowledge I now have however, it is clear that there is much more to it than I initially brushed off.

I like to think that for the majority of society, interacting with a drug dealer is not a regular occurrence. As such, we might refer to drug dealers collectively as a subculture – those who “breach our expectancies” (Hebdige, 2012, p. 131). This means that they don’t fit in with the majority. Indeed, they challenge hegemony (Hebdige, 2012, p. 129). But even such outliers of society can be contained and “located on the preferred ‘map of problematic social reality’” which is exactly what Hank does when he acts in disrespect (Hebdige, 2012, p. 132). Once, they were drug dealers whose very existence threatened Hank as a contributor to the hegemonic ideal. Now, by laughing and taking photos of them – generally poking fun – Hank is redefining them. The drug dealers become “trivialized, naturalized, domesticated,” and therefore “transformed into meaningless exotica, a ‘pure object, a spectacle, a clown’” (Hebdige, 2012, p. 133). Throughout this scene, the drug dealers are taken from an outlying place and framed as part of the hegemonic ideal, or at least put down to the extent that they no longer pose a threat to it.

It is also worth noting that the drug dealers were Hispanic. In fact, aside from a few other characters – most of them also somehow connected to criminal activity, with the exception of Hank’s DEA partner Gomez – everyone else in the show is Caucasian. In the context of this scene specifically, we can clearly place Hispanics between stage two ridicule and stage three regulation based on Clark’s four stages of minority representation. Hank poking fun at the dead

drug dealers represents Hispanics as the butt of some cruel joke, as in stage two. Gomez represents Hispanics as an upholder of the status quo, as in stage three (Class Notes, 24 September 2019). This is accurate based on where we placed Hispanics in our class discussion.

The phone call between Walter and Hank also presents the opportunity for some interesting observations in terms of masculinity. When they say things to each other like “yeah, well, thanks man” and “Jesus, the wives, huh?” they are clearly exhibiting their masculinity (Gilligan, 2009, 37:00). But this is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, this portrayal would likely fall under the category of “Iron John,” because in many ways, it is very typically masculine. On the other hand, Hank’s behavior at the crime scene – his laughing, his aggressiveness toward the drug dealers – would probably fall toward toxic masculinity. We might excuse this as “boys being boys,” but that only further drives home my point (Class Notes, 24 September 2019).

At the end of the scene, Walter rushes home to protect his family. Certainly, this solidifies his place as an “Iron John” on the scale of masculinity because traditionally, a man’s job is to work and support his family. But in the same way, Walter’s action also shows that he is obedient to the social hierarchy and therefore upholding hegemony (Adorno, 1993, 6).

We know that “television dramas often function as a window into the hopes and fears of the American psyche” (Campbell, 2015, p. 213). Therefore, we can say that the analysis of this scene reveals some troubling aspects of American society. For one, it seems that we value respect, but only for those who are deserving – those who are part of the majority. But for minorities? We’re apparently not too concerned about their appearance, as evident in the way we portray them – or don’t. After all, though we see Hispanics on the screen – some in good roles, some in bad – we do not learn much about *their* culture, beyond the stereotype that some of them are drug dealers. Finally, the topic of masculinity is addressed in this scene, and we find that

while being masculine is not bad in and of itself, certain traits are toxic – just as we see in America today.

To further explore topics currently relevant to American culture, we'll turn to one more scene – this one between Walter and his wife Skyler.

Throughout the first and second season of *Breaking Bad*, Walter avoided telling his wife Skyler that he was cooking meth. Whenever he went out to do so, he explained it to her as going for treatment or taking a break to clear his mind. When the medical bills were suddenly payed for, Walter told her that he had finally accepted the financial help that his now wealthy college friends had offered. As might be expected, Skyler had her suspicions – she knew that something was up. In episode one of season three, the relationship between Walter and Skyler reaches its climax. Walter and Skyler sit down to have a conversation about their future. Skyler starts by handing Walter paperwork for a divorce. Walter is shocked – he tells Skyler “no” and insists that they are “happily married.” Plus, a divorce would be bad for their family. Walter simply won't accept that she wants to get away from him. When Skyler accuses him of being a drug dealer, he becomes more defensive still. Eventually, however, the truth comes out. Skyler becomes upset, stands up from the table, and tries to walk away. Walter grabs her and forces her to hear him out. To end the scene, Skyler gives Walt an ultimatum – grant her the divorce or she'll report him to the authorities (Gilligan, 2010, 32:00).

One might view Skyler's decision to act with divorce as authoritative, where a woman is in charge. But Walter's unwillingness to accept, in addition to all his reasons regarding why, degrades Skyler's authority, seemingly putting her in her place as a woman, where her main focus should be “men, marriage, and motherhood,” or in this scene, Walt, their marriage, and their kids together (Basinger, 1993, p. 257). Even the way that Skyler is referred to as Walter's

wife, rather than as her own person, is a bit degrading and leans toward sexism. This scene in particular shows Skyler in a domestic role from which it seems she can't escape. I relate this to the concept of a glass ceiling we discussed in regard to women in the workplace (Class Notes, 19 September 2019).

The lying and deception that Walter uses against Skyler could be seen as keeping her in her place, just like denying her the divorce did. But it also reveals something about Walter. Up to this point, he has lied about his actions because he thought that keeping them from Skyler would be best – that it would protect her or keep her happy. Lying was useful to Walter. In this way, he embodies the ideal of American pragmatism (Class Notes, 27 August 2019). However, as Walter and Skyler sit down to talk in this scene, we can tell that Walter feels conflicted – his external action of lying does not allow for inner harmony (Class Notes, 29 August 2019). He eventually begins to resolve this by telling the truth.

But perhaps we should not feel too bad for Walter's feeling of conflict, or proud that he has taken steps to resolve it. Where in the previous scene we may have categorized Walter as an "Iron John," *this* scene exhibits his *toxic* masculinity. Both his physical and emotional aggressiveness and his unwillingness to listen to his wife, a woman, are toxic traits (Class Notes, 24 September 2019).

Similarly, we should take our empathetic feelings toward Skyler with a grain of salt – she too, does some degrading of her own. In accusing Walter of being a drug dealer, Skyler says, "I knew it... it's that Pinkman kid," referring to Jesse Pinkman, Walter's former student turned meth cooking assistant (Gilligan, 2010, 32:00). While this offhand comment seems innocent enough, Skyler is actually categorizing Jesse and thus ignoring him as an individual. Through Skyler's comment, Jesse is seen as the embodiment of a bad kid – "*that* Pinkman kid" (Gilligan,

2010, 32:00). We know that doing this “*depersonalizes* our perception of people—they are not viewed as unique individuals but as embodiments of the attributes of their group,” which in turn promotes stereotypes (Hogg, 2006, p. 10). The trouble with this, of course, is that stereotypes can be damaging, because in reality, we are all unique individuals.

As with the analysis of the first scene, analysis of the second does not provide much additional hope. We see stereotypical gender norms being upheld – women as homemakers, men as protectors. And toxic masculinity continues to rear its head. Given that this appears in two scenes, I would argue that toxic masculinity is one of the big issues that America faces today. Finally, we see that, in general, Americans tend to value utility as in the concept of American pragmatism, which is not necessarily wrong, but can lead to conflict with our inner harmony (Class Notes, 29 August 2019). Still, it is not all bad.

We cannot deny that *Breaking Bad* does an excellent job at highlighting some of the worst aspects of American culture. That these aspects are portrayed for viewers to see, may in itself seem troubling. But “research has seldom demonstrated that the media directly cause our society’s major afflictions,” so the simple portrayal is not necessarily contributing to their existence (Campbell, 2015, p. 16). Instead, what we might prefer to consider is *why* content like *Breaking Bad* – with its bad ideals – appears on television at all.

We know that a function of culture is social change, and mass media in particular works to push it. But perhaps mass media doesn’t push change by showing where we *should* go. Perhaps it pushes change by showing where we’re at and revealing *why* we should change. If this is true, then *Breaking Bad* is an ideal show for Americans to watch.

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