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“Breaking Bad” Family Values: Survival and the Slippery Slope

RWU faculty deconstruct, analyze AMC’s hit show about a man driven to drug dealing in the name of family – without spoilers!



October 1, 2013 | Alexandria Wojtanowski '15

BRISTOL, R.I. – Whether you’re a diehard fan or a casual observer, it’s been hard to escape the seemingly omnipresent pop culture phenomenon “Breaking Bad” in recent weeks. As the hit AMC drama wrapped its series this past Sunday, scholars and armchair critics alike have offered their insights to the show’s deeper meaning.

But first, for those readers unfamiliar with the show’s premise, a spoiler-free crash course:

Faced with advanced lung cancer and just two years to live, unassuming high school chemistry teacher Walter White is desperate to support his family after he’s gone. With the assistance of former student, Jesse Pinkman, Walt employs his chemistry acumen to create a pure and potent brand of crystal meth he calls Blue Sky. Over five seasons, Walt transforms from a desperate dying dad to a depraved megalomaniac drug lord. The crux of the drama is whether Walt’s motivation remains his family’s survival, or an egomaniacal desire for power. Is Walt redeemable, or should he be written off?

Two RWU faculty members – Associate Professor of English Margaret Case and Associate Professor of Writing Studies Paul Bender – investigated the Walter White “family defense”: the notion that illicit or even illegal behavior is justifiable if the motivation is family-based. Or, as Walt explains at the beginning of season five, “When we do what we do for good reasons, then we’ve got nothing to worry about. And there’s no better reason than family.” Case and Bender argue that, despite Walt’s posturing to the contrary, “Breaking Bad” challenges the family defense.

In honor of the series finale, here are 10 ways “Breaking Bad” undermines its own “family defense”:

- **Message about society:** Case and Bender’s research reveals that the show explores a tension that many viewers don’t often notice within American culture – the conflict between family morality and traditional morality. As Case put it, “our culture is drunk on family ideology.”
- **Questioning beliefs:** According to Case and Bender, “Breaking Bad” is a critique of American culture, especially the degree to which we consider the family to be sacred. Their research questions how far it is acceptable to go to protect your family, and explores the moral deficiencies in the culture’s relationship to family. “Here’s popular culture daring to ask a really hard question. It’s entertainment but it’s daring,” Case says.
- **Self-searching:** Viewers may breathe a sigh of relief to not be in Walt’s situation, but the show makes you reflect on what you would do when faced with a similar fate – what is your obligation to your family versus your own morality? Case asks viewers: at what point did you stop supporting Walter White? Was it right away, intermittently, or later in the show?
- **Manipulation:** The show puts viewers on an emotional roller coaster ride and some bad actions feel justified. Even after support for Walt wanes, and viewers question his motivations, the show sways audiences to root for him again. Though it may be deeply disturbing to root for the criminal, it is simultaneously engaging.
- **Walt: sympathetic and loathsome:** Audiences love Walt because he exemplifies the extremes in ourselves. As Case explains, “Walt is the epitome of what makes all of us evil, when we’re evil. I am not judging him because he *is* us. Walter White is every man ... I think I would say the opposite, too. He is also the epitome of what makes all of us good, when we’re good.”
- **Walt as arch-criminal Heisenberg:** The idea that the average family man could spiral so far out of control makes viewers uneasy. The show refuses to make Walt a hero by demonstrating that the damage he inflicts far outweighs any good for his family. “It doesn’t let Walt get away with it – the degree to which his family benefits is questionable,” Bender says. “And it shows over and over again other families being destroyed by the choices he makes.” When Walt adopts the persona of arch-criminal Heisenberg, it becomes clear he is not simply acting to protect his family, creating a tense turn for the show.

- **Jesse as the moral center:** Wouldn't it be strange if the moral center of a show about family morals were the one character truly divorced from his own family? However, when Walt starts to harm Jesse (in numerous ways), audience attitudes toward both characters shift. As Walt loses his moral compass, Jesse is finding his – and viewers have a new point of view for considering their own morality.
- **Slippery slope:** The show depicts moral complexities via several characters. Skylar White (Walt's wife) falls into some of the same traps as Walt when she sees the money he's making. Walt's brother-in-law Hank, a DEA agent, covers up his wife's kleptomania. And, ironically, at the conclusion of the first season, Walt comments on the arbitrary legality of drugs as he shares a Cuban cigar with Hank, who is unaware of his brother-in-law's growing drug empire. The show leaves viewers pondering if all crimes are the same differentiated only by perceived degree.
- **Call for action:** Bender's advice: If you want to make a popular movie, set up the hero as a character who stops at nothing to save his/her family. After deconstructing "Breaking Bad," Bender now observes this phenomenon in all kinds of popular culture. "It's such a resounding argument within our culture. It needs to be exposed, examined, dealt with."
- **New outlook:** After obtaining a different understanding of "family ideology" through "Breaking Bad," viewers are rethinking their interpretations of shows from "Smallville" and "Lost" to "Weeds" and "Prison Break" – all programs with a moral arc based on the premise of family first. "Breaking Bad" might shift audience attitudes toward entertainment – begging the realization that there is a line that shouldn't be crossed, even for family.

Each week, the 10 on Tuesday series provides a fresh take on interesting university initiatives, research projects, campus happenings and more. Have an idea for a 10 on Tuesday? Email pdq@rwu.edu.

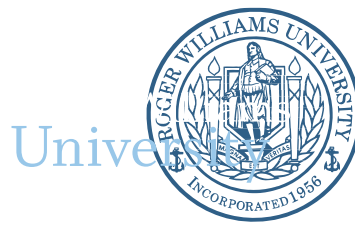
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