

GROWTH... DECAY... THEN TRANSFORMATION:
THE PHILOSOPHICAL CYCLES OF *BREAKING BAD*

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Section 1: Formal Analysis

“Crawl Space” is the eleventh of thirteen episodes in season 4 of AMC’s television drama *Breaking Bad*, first aired in 2011.¹ It was directed by Scott Winant and written by George Mastras and Sam Catlin. This specific scene (see Fig. 1) occurs within the final few minutes of the episode, bumping up to the closing credits. It runs approximately 2 minutes and 36 seconds long, featuring 23 shots total. The scene features the protagonist Walter White and his wife Skyler White in their house, with a brief cutaway featuring Skyler’s sister Marie Schrader in her house.

The scene is entirely indoors and thusly features pale, brownish colors and lighting. The color palette almost exclusively consists of varying shades of brown or pastel whites, with only the occasional orange and green. The lighting complements the faded colors, with the primary source of light being an unpleasant fluorescent hanging above, creating an ugly and almost dingy aura. The other major source of light is natural sunlight, which can be seen through windows at the edge of the crawl space, creating discomforting beams through the dark room at a heavy angle that would seem to imply a time of late afternoon. The same hard natural lighting can be seen briefly in the hallway and kitchen, providing the only pale light in an otherwise darkening house. A brief cutaway shows another character talking on the phone in the same intensive late afternoon lighting, silhouetted in front of the windows, creating a polar contrast.

The shots in this scene frame the characters in specific and jarring locations within the composition. In the conversation between Walt and Skyler, the two of them remain on the rule of thirds, being situated on the left and right, respectively. There is never a medium shot with them

¹ *Breaking Bad*, season 4, episode 11, “Crawl Space,” directed by Scott Winant, written by George Mastras and Sam Catlin, aired September 25, 2011, on AMC, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1683086/>.

both in the frame, but given that Walt is lying beneath the floor staring up at Skyler through a trapdoor, the singles are pointed at extreme angles, being almost entirely perpendicular to the ground a majority of the time. Close-up shots keep them situated in the proper locations according to the 180 degree rule. A shot-reverse-shot technique is applied, with a couple of Walt's singles being filmed over Skyler's shoulder, and a handful of Skyler's partially obscured by the crawl space. Medium shots of Walt show his entire body from below the crawl space within the lower third of the frame, but Skyler's full body is never shown until after the conversation, when she can be seen walking down the hallway and picking up the phone from the kitchen counter. The relation of the two characters in the frame puts Skyler in a position of more power and Walt in a trapped position, both figuratively and literally, and appearing completely powerless. In this shot she still adheres to the 180 degree rule, remaining on the right side of the frame in relation to the other subject: the phone. The phone is initially set in focus in the foreground, with a wall in the middle creating a clear division between the two subjects. The cutaway shot is a medium close-up, putting Marie in the middle of the frame. The final shot closing the scene breaks the rule of thirds, staring at Walt head-on in the dead center of the frame, opening with his body occupying the full picture, tracking away until the trapdoor "frames" his body into a small figure in the middle, almost like a window or a portrait on a wall. It creates a sense that he is completely and utterly boxed in and powerless, with the whole world on top of him.

As an intense confrontation scene between two characters, the camera movement is fairly limited. Rather than opting for an establishing shot following Griffith's Pattern, it opens with a medium shot of Walt from below the floor. The trapdoor's entrance is then revealed with Skyler

entering the frame, at which point the shot-reverse-shot singles begin during their conversation, which are intercut fairly quickly. Walt's singles are noticeably shakier than Skyler's, though the shots are all fairly bouncy. A medium close-up is used as Skyler makes a tense confession, with a close-up shot provided for Walt's reaction. The singles are then interrupted by a notably lengthy 12 second instance of the medium shot of Walt from below. The shot-reverse-shot returns as Skyler leaves the room and a new part of the house is revealed in the scene in the first and only shot stabilized shot in the scene, creating tension. The cutaway to Marie is brief, but as it follows her pacing across the room, it has considerably more movement in contrast. A tracking shot follows Skyler slowly walking down the hall and toward the phone to pick it up, which helps to imply that her actions are the ones of consequence in the moment, as opposed to Walt, who is still in one location and unable to move freely. The final shot of Walt lying on the floor is a shockingly long tracking shot that lasts 35 seconds in total. Slowly, the camera backs away from Walt and up towards the roof, revealing the room in its entirety for the first time, from above. Like Walt's singles earlier, it is very shaky, especially as it exits the trapdoor and passes the light at the top of the room.

Overall, the scene mixes grim and lifeless colors with an unpleasant fluorescent glow and the foreboding vibe of the departing late afternoon sunlight to create a creepy aura of impending disaster, complemented by symbolic framing, manipulative composition, and strategic editing to build tension and leave the audience in suspense. The scene serves as a climax for the episode and a turning point for both the season and multi-season plot thread alike, catching Walt right in the middle of the necessary transformation to overcome the antagonist. He can be seen in this particular episode under the most intense pressure, having had his entire family threatened with

murder by a criminal mastermind and lacking the money necessary to escape. As a result, just like the series showcases on multiple occasions, he transforms and overcomes his adversary—and as a necessary step in said transformation, he is forced to sacrifice even more of his already-fractured morality.

Section 2: Research Essay

Within the very first few minutes of television drama *Breaking Bad*'s pilot episode, the central theme of the story is presented succinctly through protagonist Walter White's comparison between chemical reactions and life: "It is growth, then decay, then transformation."² The show repeatedly explores this type of "transformation" by applying it to the anti-hero's version of the monomyth and blurring the gray area of moral vindication to deliver the ultimate message that when greeted with a certain type of pressure, a person will be forced to undergo an ego death—and that to emerge victorious, the process may sacrifice their morality, resulting in an unethical rise in power, bathed in muddy and uncertain justifications with a tinge of fleeting nobility.

At the core of just about every story concerning a grand heroic quest lies Joseph Campbell's monomyth—an archetypal structure, often referred to as "the hero's journey", that follows a character's trip out of the ordinary world and journey into the great unknown. When it comes to *Breaking Bad*, however, the journey Walter White undergoes would almost certainly define him as an anti-hero, as his actions and decisions make it difficult to root for him a great deal of the time, and he feels more like the source of moral injustice rather than resolution. Whereas Campbell's monomyth applies to the hero archetype, a similar cyclical arc can be applied to that of the anti-hero: one that lacks the same clear dividing lines between "good" and "bad". On one end of the spectrum is "a morally conscious person rising from nothing to become a larger-than-life figure"; on the other end is a character who "[justifies] immoral behavior and thereby win the audiences' sympathy and support."³ Both archetypes will undergo trials and

² *Breaking Bad*, "Pilot," season 1, episode 1, directed and written by Vince Gilligan, aired January 20, 2008, on AMC, accessed December 9, 2019, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0959621/>.

³ John Edward Thornton II, "The Anti-Hero's Journey: Transformations of Characters from 'Law Abiding Citizens' to sympathetic anti-heroes in the works of F. Gary Gray" (Master's thesis, Savannah College of Art and Design, 2011), 14.

tribulations, often similar in nature, and travel through a “passage.”⁴ Should the characters emerge on the other end of said “passage”, they will be forced to make choices and change accordingly: “[on] the upside of the passage, the hero resists temptation and goes up the ladder,” while “[on] the downside, the antihero [*sic*] gives in to temptation and goes down the ladder.”⁵ The two story archetypes mirror each other in that way— the distinguishing factor being the way the character chooses to react to their environment.

All of this begs another controversial question— a dangerous and ambivalent one that lies deep within the heart of *Breaking Bad*— is Walt really an anti-hero at all? *Breaking Bad* doesn’t hesitate for a moment to throw Walt into situations that would seem to disqualify him from the title of “hero”— someone who is “admired for achievements and noble qualities” or “shows great courage.”⁶ By the end of the first episode, he has already stolen from a school, blackmailed a former student into illegal actions, cooked and distributed crystal meth, and killed a drug dealer when threatened at gunpoint. Such criminal offenses, especially when regarding an industry that exploits fatally addictive human tendencies, would be difficult to describe as “noble” or “[courageous].” But when Walt is originally introduced to the audience, he is an ordinary family man with untapped scientific genius— “a downtrodden teacher reduced to washing cars to supplement his household income.”⁷ From the very start, he is depicted as someone who never truly surpassed anyone’s expectations in his life and fails to stand up when

⁴ James Bonnet, “The Journey of the Antihero in Film: Exploring the Dark Side,” *Writers Store*, July 13, 2002, accessed December 9, 2019, <https://www.writersstore.com/exploring-the-dark-side-the-anti-heros-journey/>.

⁵ Bonnet, “Journey.”

⁶ *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “hero,” accessed December 9, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hero>.

⁷ Joe MacDonagh, “Breaking Bad,” *Philosophy Now*, 2016, accessed December 9, 2019, https://philosophynow.org/issues/116/Breaking_Bad.

being taken advantage of by his boss or disrespected by his students. He can barely scrape by in his monotonous jobs, struggling to provide for his own family or even himself— and after all of that, is diagnosed with cancer and told he has two years, at best, to live. As a result, the audience understands Walt’s pains and may end up supporting his decision to cook meth to provide for his family financially once he’s gone. As magazine *Philosophy Now* puts it, “he acts in good faith; he answers what he believes is called upon in his nature.”⁸ Viewers are led to believe at the beginning that everything he does is a selfless act in support of his family’s well-being. So, again— with that context, couldn’t his actions be justified as a “noble” and “[courageous]” sacrifice for the greater good? Even Walt’s distributor, Gustavo Fring, plays into this ideology when he declares that “a man provides for his family... even when he's not appreciated, or respected, or even loved. He simply bears up and he does it.”⁹ While he is referencing Walt’s role in the drug business, Gus’ quote could find a hauntingly fitting application describing Walt’s prior situation as a teacher and car wash employee. The difference between his situations, in that context, is between a passive, unsuccessful job that damages his pride at the benefit of others; and an active, successful job that boosts his pride at the expense of others. The audience is left with the ethical dilemma of wondering where they have to draw the line of what constitutes as “moral”. At what point is a law or social norm too fundamental to be disobeyed in any form? When do the ends stop justifying the means? Eventually, in the finale, Walt finally confesses to Skyler, saying “All the things that I did, you need to understand... I did it for me. I liked it. I was

⁸ MacDonagh, “Breaking Bad.”

⁹ *Breaking Bad*, season 3, episode 5, “Más,” directed by Johan Renck, written by Moira Walley-Beckett, aired April 18, 2010, on AMC, accessed December 9, 2019, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1615555/>.

good at it. And I was really... I was alive.”¹⁰ But a long time before that conversation, it’s very clear that a majority of Walt’s actions are self-centered and driven by greed, especially visible in the authority of his dominant persona as a meth cook as opposed to his submissive and indecisive previous lifestyle. While he arguably did not begin cooking meth for these reasons, the thrill it gave him undeniably kept him going, despite failed multiple attempts to quit. So, yes, Walt can ultimately be easily defined as an anti-hero; whether or not he was an anti-hero from the very start is where the uncertainty lies. Deciphering when exactly these motivations shifted and his excuses lost all credibility poses yet another ambiguous question so essential to the show that the title itself spells it out— when exactly does Walter White truly “break bad?”

The titular term “breaking bad” is a colloquial Southern American English term defined as the act of “[going] bad; [turning] toward immorality or crime.”¹¹ This definition is an apt description of the major transformation Walter White undertakes. In fact, when originally pitched to AMC, show creator Vince Gilligan described it as “a story about a man who transforms himself from Mr. Chips into Scarface.”¹² As is the case with almost all modern stories, parallels can be drawn between *Breaking Bad* and a certain historically acclaimed work of the past: William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Walt’s journey through the series very closely mirrors that of the eponymous protagonist in Shakespeare’s age-old tragedy. As discussed earlier, Walt’s decisions become fueled by self-centered motives, like Macbeth, and as a result, the two stories explore similar arcs depicting the corruption of power alongside the devolution of humanity in

¹⁰ *Breaking Bad*, season 5, episode 16, “Felina,” directed and written by Vince Gilligan, featuring Bryan Cranston, Anna Gunn, and Aaron Paul, aired September 29, 2013, on AMC, accessed December 9, 2019, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2301455/>.

¹¹ *Wiktionary*, s.v. “break bad,” accessed December 9, 2019, https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/break_bad.

¹² Genetta M. Adams, “Breaking Bad: From Mr. Chips to Scarface in 10 easy steps,” *CNN*, July 12, 2012, accessed December 9, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2012/07/12/showbiz/tv/breaking-bad-chips-scarface/index.html>

these characters. Once both characters believe they have “broken bad”, they see it as a point of no return and believe there’s no use attempting to resolve past misdeeds— an excuse that continues them on their current trajectory. As Macbeth puts it, “Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill.”¹³ Walt, like Macbeth, “[throws] himself deeper into the abyss, believing that he has rendered his life meaningless through so many foul acts.”¹⁴ He bluntly showcases this excuse as he explains to his cooking partner, Jesse, why he refuses to quit the business, stating, “If you believe that there's a hell... we're already pretty much going there, right? But I'm not gonna lie down until I get there.”¹⁵ At his lowest point, Macbeth shares a similar nihilistic outlook on life: “It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing.”¹⁶ It is a multifaceted statement— while seemingly confessing his guilt and insignificance, it can also be read as a way to excuse all the unethical actions he has taken in the name of a destructive form of nihilism. In regards to that interpretation, Walt makes a similar claim, explaining to Jesse that he’s in neither “the meth business or the money business,” but rather “the empire business.”¹⁷ By the time both Walt and Macbeth have transformed into their strongest forms, their power peaks while their humanity vanishes almost completely. Ultimately, their undoings end up being fueled and perpetuated by their overreliance on pride, and their kingdoms fall while their shame and guilt comes back to overpower them. Walt, like Macbeth, is trapped in a cycle in which “[the] very acts that make him feel more masculine simultaneously make him more shameful. His

¹³ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (Arden Shakespeare, 1997), act 3, scene 2, line 61, accessed December 9, 2019, <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/macbeth/>.

¹⁴ Tom Gualtieri, “Walter White vs. Macbeth,” *Salon*, August 10, 2013, accessed December 9, 2019, https://www.salon.com/2013/08/10/walter_white_vs_macbeth/.

¹⁵ *Breaking Bad*, season 5, episode 7, “Say My Name,” directed and written by Thomas Schnauz, aired August 26, 2012, on AMC, accessed December 9, 2019, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2301467/>.

¹⁶ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, act 5, scene 5, lines 28-30.

¹⁷ *Breaking Bad*, season 5, episode 6, “Buyout,” directed by Colin Bucksey, written by Gennifer Hutchison, aired August 19, 2012, on AMC, accessed December 9, 2019, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2301465/>.

shame, however, feeds his insecurity, thus leading him to repeat the cycle of crime.”¹⁸ This cycle comes back to bite both of them in the end, resulting in their brutal fates as the self-imposed pattern of shame and criminality reverses course.

As a whole, *Breaking Bad*'s complex ambiguities and themes can all be found stemming from a word used on multiple occasions above, as well as within the very opening scenes of the show: “transformation”. This fundamental step on both the hero's journey and anti-hero's journey tie together all the actions in the *Breaking Bad* universe. In regards to the show's morals and themes, Vince Gilligan stated, “If there's a larger lesson to *Breaking Bad*, it's that actions have consequences...”¹⁹ These actions— the growth and decay— push characters to places where they have to funnel through the aforementioned “passage”²⁰ that may very well determine their place as the hero or anti-hero of their story. In individual plot threads, the overarching story, and single discretions, Walt undergoes this “transformation” throughout the series. He is pushed to the brink of sanity and “dies” in a sort, being “reborn” with a newfound motivation stemming from the despair, to ultimately overcome— to declare victory against double-edged moral dilemmas at the expense of throwing away ethical standards. As an anti-hero, he becomes the subject of muddled justifications on a slippery slope towards the ultimate repercussions of his self-destructive tendencies. Yet with each obstacle and hindrance that Walt may run into along the way, his decision-making process is honed and perpetuated cyclically by the results of past trials— trials that he believes bind all of humanity to their respective journeys in life.

¹⁸ David R. Koepsell and Robert Arp, eds., *Breaking Bad and Philosophy: Badder Living Through Chemistry* (Chicago: Carus Publishing Company, 2012), chap. 6, accessed December 9, 2019, https://www.academia.edu/20088409/Breaking_Bad_and_Philosophy.

¹⁹ MacDonagh, “*Breaking Bad*.”

²⁰ Bonnet, “Journey.”

Gilligan reminds us of this universal human truth: “Well, that's all of life, right? I mean, it's just the constant. It's the cycle. It's solution, dissolution— just over and over and over. It is growth, then decay, then transformation. It is fascinating, really.”²¹

²¹ Gilligan, “Pilot.”



Figure 1: “Still image from *Breaking Bad*, season 4, episode 11, ‘Crawl Space’,” accessed November 14, 2019, <http://i.imgur.com/uRuFmcW.png>.

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