

Going West in *Breaking Bad*: Ambiguous Morality, Violent Masculinity, and the Antihero's Role in the Evolution of the American Western

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Vince Gilligan's *Breaking Bad* tells a story about more than cancer, chemistry, and meth. Viewing the series as a tale of the American West illuminates the ways it highlights and challenges entrenched American ideals. Looking through a historical and cinematic lens to analyze *Breaking Bad* as a Western, I will argue that we can discover how tropes of the Western genre continue to influence contemporary American identity. Although there have been ambiguous protagonists similar to Walt in Western film and literature, Gilligan takes this trope to a more intimate level, inviting us into an irresistible love-hate relationship with Walt, who at first resembles the typical white, middle-class, American man but transforms into the horrific Machiavellian beast, Heisenberg. Specifically, I will contend that *Breaking Bad* draws on Western motifs but also that Gilligan, through rethinking the iconic endings of famous Westerns, recharges the genre with new meanings. The open ending of the series suggests that *Breaking Bad* does not necessarily critique its violent, Western antihero, but indicates that this persona

persists today as a powerful depiction of American masculine identity, leading to potentially tragic consequences.

Historian Henry Adams once admitted that the process of history is as mysterious and unchangeable as the laws of physics and chemistry: “A dynamic law requires that two masses—nature and man—must go on, reacting upon each other, without stop, as the sun and a comet react on each other, and that any appearance of stoppage is illusive” (Adams 375).¹ Retracing Adams’s steps, Robert Morgan applies a chemical metaphor to the story of westward expansion:

The tens of thousands of settlers, hungry for land, adventure, opportunity, are like the molecules of an element compelled to combine with another, the territory of the North American West. No law, no government, no leader, could stop that accelerating chemical process until the combining was complete. The celebrated or reviled leaders are partly figureheads that help us give shape to the messy narrative of this history. The real history is the unstoppable reactions of countless entities combining to create new compounds. Romantics might describe the course of events as alchemy, critics as destructive breakdown of natural substances. (xxii)

The West’s vast landscape—harsh, barren, and dangerous, yet also strikingly beautiful—called forth nineteenth-century Americans seeking space to fulfill their own Manifest Destiny. Many adventurers could not resist the pull of the place and the freedom it evoked. Explorers were even encouraged by their president to expand westward. Yet only the most rugged, individualistic, and independent could survive such a place, often through violent destruction of landscape and Native Americans. Once commodified in literature and film, however, the dominant image of such settlers—which had included women and minorities—became a masculine white man, forming a cowboy persona that intertwined with the Western landscape and the idea of the American Dream. These building blocks of the Western genre have become deeply ingrained in memory and cultural fantasy, despite the fact that the era lasted only roughly fifty years, from about 1850 to 1900. More than a century later, however, the iconic, “manly” cowboy endures,

¹ Quoted in Morgan, xxi.

and America remains obsessed with everything about the West, continually reimagining its narratives, themes, and images in contemporary stories. Like characters and themes of the American West, *Breaking Bad*'s antihero, a brilliant high school chemistry teacher named Walter White, represents a violent yet admirable force as unstoppable as the scientific laws he teaches.

Breaking Bad propels the viewer into a more familiar but also more brutal form of the real than other Westerns have done. As Jane Tompkins argues, Americans' attraction to everything Western stems from our desire to experience the "real." Where destruction, death, and violence come to the foreground, in a place she calls "west of everything" (24), we come face to face with this sensory reality:

To go west, as far west as you can go, west of everything, is to die. Death is everywhere in this genre. Not just in the shoot-outs, or in the scores of bodies that pile up toward the narrative's close, but even more compellingly, in the desert landscape with which the bodies of the gunned down eventually merge. The classical Western landscape is a tableau of towering rock and stretching sand where nothing lives. Its aura of death, both parodied and insisted upon in place names like Deadwood and Tombstone, is one of the genre's most essential features, more seductive than the saloon girl's breasts, more necessary than six-guns. For although to die is to lose the game [...], [the violent cowboys'] transfiguration in death, "fallen in their blood and their glory," make them enviable. (24)

Death represents an essential element in the chemical make-up not only of the imagined West, but also in its real, physical landscape; it cannot be extracted any more than blood can be wiped from the plains. *Breaking Bad*'s landscape matches that of the Western, and mortality acts as a prominent participant.

Death serves as the catalyst for all of Walt's actions, encouraging the viewer's sympathy for him and justifying everything he does with the necessity to leave money for his family, complicating his placement on the spectrum from hero to antihero. Before his cancer diagnosis, Walt typifies the "one-dimensional, often ridiculous caricature who [seems to contribute] little to society" so common on American television (Kirby 109). He teaches high school chemistry all

day and works evenings at a car wash, where crouching to wipe the rims of a student's car humiliates him and places him physically below the younger man. Even with two jobs he can barely scrape together enough money to support his family. Faced with the prospect of imminent death, Walt feels emasculated by the thought of leaving his wife, disabled son, and unborn baby with nothing, but this feeling of inadequacy soon spurs him to become one of the *least* one-dimensional characters on television. Ann Larabee calls him "a meek, soft-voiced man in a feminized profession" (1132), but as he gets more entangled in the world of cooking and selling meth, he takes on the masculine, powerful persona "Heisenberg" and bodies pile up in the desert. Despite his horrific transformation, Gilligan's initial characterization of Walt as the familiar middle-class man fighting to support his family works to strengthen the sympathy the viewer may feel for the protagonist.

Growing more powerful with each episode, Heisenberg follows Western tropes such as ingenuity and self-reinvention by using his chemistry prowess to gain the upper hand in a world of seasoned, skilled, and psychotic meth cooks and dealers, yet he cannot pursue the formation of his new identity in a middle-class, American world; he must inhabit a space more similar to the frontier, where violence and blood are not uncommon. "With an eye to the Western genre and the frontier, this mirror world," as Larabee calls a similar place, in which Walt lives as Heisenberg, "is constructed of warring sovereignties of monomaniacal dictators who create and control addictive desires through technical virtuosity and branding" (1132). Heisenberg's "technical virtuosity" results in the purest meth anyone has ever seen, in a sky-blue shade that becomes his signature. Like Western ranchers who marked their cattle with a specific brand in order to demonstrate their personal capital and domain, Heisenberg brands his product to indicate more than its purity: his power and control over the market in his territory. The intense violence

Heisenberg perpetrates in his alternative world helps establish the moral ambiguity the viewer often feels toward the most brutal Western film and television protagonists.

With each act of violence, the show's characterization of Walt prompts the viewer to hope he will get away with his scheme; despite his cunning, guile, and cold manipulations, his skill and grit—like the cowboy's—are difficult not to envy and admire. One minute the viewer hopes for Walt to succeed but the next feels revolted by his cruelty and perhaps ashamed for rooting for him. Thus, protagonist's position on a heroism spectrum, from outlaw to hero to antihero, proves fluid rather than fixed, and our feelings toward him mirror his own ambiguous morality. The series' final episode, "Felina," leaves Walt's end ambiguous as well, further complicating our sympathy for him. Unlike the cowboy hero, Walt is not transfigured in death, nor are we offered the satisfaction of knowing he has gotten away or the authorities have caught him, restoring justice and social order. The ambiguous ending challenges the viability of Western tropes in contemporary America. Still, a century later, we cannot escape fascination with Western characters, imagery, and morality. I argue that Walt and his story, particularly because of the final episode of *Breaking Bad*, remain situated in, yet simultaneously challenge, "the West."

For outlaw-heroes (or antiheroes) like Heisenberg, their prowess is often their pathology. Viewers may find it difficult not to admire Walt, despite his violence, destruction, and transformation into Heisenberg, a ruthless Machiavellian beast. Machiavelli's parable of the "semi-animal, semi-human [...] is meant to indicate that a prince must know how to use both natures, and that the one without the other is not durable. A prince being thus obliged to know well how to act as a beast must imitate the fox and the lion" (Machiavelli 64). Furthermore, as Heisenberg so aptly demonstrates, "it is not, therefore, necessary for a prince to have all the

above-named qualities [of the fox and the lion], but it is very necessary to seem to have them” (Machiavelli 65). In *Breaking Bad*’s opening scene, Walt appears emasculated, wearing only his underwear and a shirt while frantically recording a tearful message for his family, admitting to what he has done because he thinks the police are about to arrest him. Yet moments later, he aims a gun at the oncoming police car in a pose that *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), “the first important movie Western and the first blockbuster film” (Rogin 73), made famous, and which Western film replicates incessantly. In this scene, Walt’s incapacity and awkwardness contrast starkly with the hyper-masculine persona of Heisenberg that Walt takes on later in the series, foreshadowed when he points the gun past the camera in this episode, and they increase our awe and admiration at his drastic transformation.



Walt echoing *The Great Train Robbery*’s iconic shot²

² “Pilot.” *Breaking Bad*. AMC. 2012. Television.

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In this shot, Walt's stoic visage contrasts sharply with his tear-streaked face earlier in the scene. The shot's frame ends above Walt's waist, cutting off the bare legs and underwear that made him appear emasculated and weak, and the camera angle shifts slightly below Walt's eye level, forcing the viewer to look up at him and feel small under his raised gun. Furthermore, Walt's green shirt matches the color of the vegetation in the background, suggesting not only that his identity relies on the Western landscape but also that his new persona, Heisenberg, will fight for survival in harsh, lifeless conditions the same way sage and cactus thrive in the desert. In the span of moments, Heisenberg's forceful determination and violence overpower Walt's impulsive willingness to end his own life in the face of adversity, and his transformation into the masculine cowboy begins.

In contemporary American culture, the mythic Western man—re-imagined through Walt's character and often portrayed in literature, film, and television—continues to provide an appealing template for many men. Indeed, Walt's struggle for masculine power mirrors the crisis Michael Kimmel studies in America's angriest white men: neo-Nazis and modern-day Klansmen, among others. Kimmel argues that they believe ideal masculinity stems from the economic promise inherent in the American Dream (13). Like these men, Walt also exhibits rage, and eventually reacts violently because he feels cheated out of the economic success promised to the American self-made man who works hard and follows the rules. Gretchen and Eliot, his former partners in a lucrative chemical company, eventually deprive him of what he sees as his fair share in the enterprise, and cancer deprives him even of the ability to continue working as a teacher to support his family. Kimmel writes, "The past two decades have witnessed mainstream white American men exploding like never before in our history. They draw their ranks from the middle class [...]. They feel they've borne the weight of the world on

their backs, and they can't hold it up any longer" (4-5). The picture Kimmel paints of a man situated in the midst of the country's economic upheaval and fighting (often violently) for what he believes is his by right (money, power, status) perfectly reflects Walter White. Extending the metaphor of the American Dream, Kimmel incorporates the story of the American man moving west in the nineteenth century and seeking a place to start over because of economic or masculine failure. Walt enacts this story by going to the desert to cook and later sell his meth. As Brett Martin explains, literature, film, and television retell this story of Westward movement, influencing American men: "Just as the Big Novel had in the 1960s and the subversive films of New Hollywood had in the 1970s, television became the place to go to see stories of the triumph and betrayals of the American Dream at the beginning of the twenty-first century" (11). Furthermore, Martin points out that the era's most significant shows tell stories "largely *about* manhood—in particular the contours of male power and the infinite varieties of male combat" (13). Walt's—or Heisenberg's—violent commitment to re-pursuing power that supposed masculine failure has stolen retells the essential Western in contemporary American southwestern setting.

In many Westerns, the hat the protagonist dons symbolizes his masculinity and individualism, initiating his transformation into a hero. In order to facilitate his pursuit, Walt takes on the alter ego of Heisenberg, including a hat to go with the name. As Timothy Egan explains, "A person puts on a cowboy hat anywhere in the world, even if alone in a room, and starts acting differently—sometimes stupidly, sometimes nobly, but it is a new personality" (6). In Season 1, Episode 7, "A No-Rough-Stuff-Type Deal," Walt first wears his black hat, solidifying his creation of a new identity, while he and Jesse wait in the junkyard for Tuco to arrive and make their first transaction. The confidence Walt feels while wearing the hat

overshadows the foolishness of meeting an unpredictable, violent drug dealer in an isolated junkyard. The hat defines him, and Walt rides into this scene on the power he gained from going to Tuco's, announcing himself as Heisenberg, and using a chemical weapon to get the money rightfully owed him and to avenge the beating of his partner. When Heisenberg visits Tuco's office with the mercury fulminate, the intense spectacle of the scene encourages the viewer to feel impressed by Walt's knowledge of and ability to make mercury fulminate, but also appreciative of his loyalty to Jesse. More importantly, Tuco's tendency to slip instantaneously into uncontrollable anger impels the viewer to focus more on the courage it takes Walt to challenge Tuco than his lack of criminal knowledge or skill. However, Walt's ability to acquire that skill and corral his intelligence into criminal cleverness and a new Western male prototype takes not much longer than putting on his hat.

With Walt's increased capability as a criminal comes more violence and blood, yet his ferocity and heroism only add to his appeal. Perhaps the most chilling example occurs in Season 3, Episode 12, "Half Measure." Walt has killed men before, caught up in his own ambiguous moral code in which he considers anything he does for his family morally permissible. Following this code, which also involves loyalty to Jesse, Walt appears comfortable with—even proud of—murdering the gang members to save Jesse's life. The viewer might even feel proud of him for it, or at least that the ends justify the means because Jesse's character is so likeable. Jesse's approach to the rival gang members echoes traditional Westerns with the close-up, slow-motion shot of his feet on the pavement, yet he lacks the confidence that typically radiates from cowboy heroes. Similarly, slow-motion close-ups focus on the gang members' guns as they stand waiting for Jesse, recalling images of shootouts on dusty streets. The shot, which moves from Jesse's terrified face to the gang members' weapons, clearly demonstrates Jesse's vulnerability. Out of

nowhere, Walt suddenly rams the two men with his car. Exiting the car and seeing that one of the men survived, Walt runs to the dropped gun, picks it up, and shoots him.



His stoic expression mirrors that of a cowboy and starkly opposes Jesse's, whose face reveals shock as he shakes with fear and awe. Furthermore, the cinematography prompts the viewer to feel awe for what Walt has just done as the camera angle shifts low, forcing us to look up at Walt holding the smoking gun. The juxtaposition between Walt's lack of emotion and Jesse's terror invites the spectator's own fear and awe in this moment, but like many Westerns, the scene rattles our hero worship because of his cold-blooded brutality. Thus, the episode does not place Walt firmly on the hero or outlaw end of the spectrum.

Many classic Westerns use techniques similar to the shootout scene in "Half Measure" to simultaneously destabilize their protagonist's morality and promote his heroism, from Sam Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* to Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*. In the former, the

viewer sees Billy from a low angle after he shoots the town deputy, Ollinger, in the back. Forcing the viewer to look up at him, the camera angle displays Billy not as a criminal but as a victorious warrior raised on a pedestal. Similarly, in *Unforgiven*, Eastwood's Will Munny discovers that a man he shot did not die. Standing over him, Will looks down the barrel of his gun and shoots the man on the ground. Here too, the view from the victim's vantage point, looking up into Will's leathery, scarred face, emphasizes his power and the viewer's position as an admirer. Peckinpah uses light to emphasize his protagonist's heroism, and the dark cinematography in both *Unforgiven* and "Half Measure" emphasizes the heroes' sharp features as they enter dim scenes, move in and out of shadows, and finally discharge their guns backlit by streetlamps. Like Western outlaw-heroes whose moral codes allow justification for their killings, Walt's loyalty to Jesse absolves him of murdering two men. His faithfulness, along with the episode's cinematography, not only reassures the viewer that Walt believed his actions to be right, but also reinforces their necessity—to save Jesse's life and their partnership. Perhaps shocked by Walt's show of heart in his willingness to kill two men for Jesse's sake, we rethink both his earlier and subsequent violent actions and consider his loyalty, courage, and skill.

Beyond its protagonist's loyalty and courage, both the series and its main character simultaneously convey and confront essential American values, such as rugged individualism in pursuit of an American Dream, a foundational trope in the Western genre. In the final season of *Breaking Bad*, Walt says, "Jesse, you asked me if I was in the meth business or the money business. Neither. I'm in the empire business" (Season 5, Episode 6, "Buyout"). In the pursuit of expanding his meth empire across New Mexico, the Western United States, and even abroad, Walt mirrors what Robert Morgan calls American Westward expansion's "oxymoron of imperial power promoting the spread of liberty" (xviii). New Hampshire's motto, "Live free or die,"

shown on the license plate of Walt's car after he comes out of hiding, reminds us that for Walt, promoting liberty means utilizing his unique skill in order to make money even if it means overpowering anything in his way. Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper write in "Imagining the Wildness of the West" that

Brimming over with social and cultural meaning, the American West serves not only as the country's heartland, but as a setting for morality tales, proving ground for mainstream values and ideals, and a point of encounter between order and chaos, progress and ruin, humanity and the "wild." The frontier—or, more accurately, the process by which it was conquered—is seen as one of the defining elements in American national identity: the catalyst and proving ground for the courage, individuality, and dynamism of the American character—the "dominant individualism" that [is seen] as a hallmark of that character. (xviii)

Yet this pursuit for progress, individuality, and confirmation of one's courage on the frontier obscures the violence and greed that are often its precursors. Achieving these goals required westward movement because "the frontier was, for many, the 'wellspring' of the independent, indomitable American spirit" (Miller and Van Riper xix). By placing Walt in the Western American desert, Gilligan aligns him geographically with the outlaws and heroes of traditional Westerns and philosophically with the idea of Manifest Destiny. Describing our attraction to the ambiguously heroic cowboy, Tompkins writes, "What the [viewer] and the hero feel at the end of the episode is a sense of hard-won achievement. The laboriousness of the experience, its mind-numbing and backbreaking demands, are essential to the form of satisfaction the narrative affords" (12). In the end, Walt finally admits to Skyler that he stayed in the meth business for himself—not for his family—thus fulfilling his own American Dream and following in the footsteps of countless masculine, independent cowboys who ventured into the frontier, leaving women, wives, and children behind.

The violence Walt commits, however, does not ultimately afford the redemption present in nineteenth-century Western narratives. Miller and Van Riper argue that a "neo-Western,"

takes “the bleak moral universe of the spaghetti Westerns to its logical conclusion and challenges the idea of ‘regeneration through violence’ at the core of the traditional Western” (xxv), but I argue that while *Breaking Bad* does challenge the redemptive power of violence, it ultimately points to an even more grim “moral universe” that the series’ ending proves has not concluded, but rather continues to influence contemporary American identity. The idea that the West remains vibrantly alive in American cultural imagination in spite of its often repulsive and immoral violence parallels the permanence of the Western landscape in the face of the terrible destruction Walt performs on things in *Breaking Bad*. Heisenberg leaves an impressive list of demolished places and lives in his wake: the RV, Gus’s lab, and Walt’s home; drug dealer Crazy 8 in Season 1 and Mike in Season 5, with hundreds of others in between—including his own family, most poignantly represented by Hank’s murder—and even himself. In spite of this massive devastation, the landscape of the West, particularly the desert where the series begins and where Walt’s empire comes to ruin, remains visually unchanged. Like Ozymandias in Shelley’s poem, in the *Breaking Bad* episode of the same name, only the ruins of Walt’s empire remain in a desert that appears impervious, and neither the protagonist nor the viewer experience redemption. Season 5, Episode 14, “Ozymandias,” begins with a flashback to Walt and Jesse’s first cook, in the same location Walt later buries his money. In the flashback Walt steps out of the RV in only his underwear and apron, and we hear a bittersweet reminder of Jesse’s teasing. As Walt walks away to call Skyler (and lie to her), his bare legs recall Percy B. Shelley’s image of “Two vast and trunkless legs of stone” standing in the desert:

I met a traveller from an antique land,
 Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
 Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand,
 Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read

Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
 The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
 And on the pedestal, these words appear:
 My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
 Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
 Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
 The lone and level sands stretch far away. (Percy B. Shelley, "Ozymandias")



Walt as Ozymandias in the desert³

Yet, in this shot, as he smiles and tells Skyler he loves her, his face does not yet portray the “frown, / And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command”⁴ Heisenberg will later wear. His bare legs, a reminder of his emasculated powerlessness in the first episode, his sage-green shirt, and his brown shoes blend in with the landscape, reflecting Shelley’s image of a once-powerful image now overtaken by blood-red sand and rock. Slowly, everything in the frame disappears,

³ “Ozymandias.” *Breaking Bad*. AMC. 2012. Television.

⁴ Percy B. Shelley, “Ozymandias.”

beginning with Walt. In the time span represented by the disappearing scene, Walt has transformed fully into Heisenberg, his old identity gone along with everything else from the flashback. Although automatic gunfire soon shatters the silence of the desert landscape, even the most violent shootout and all the blood spilled on the sand cannot alter the red rocks and green sage against the wide blue sky, a landscape emblematic of the classic Western. Only the wreckage of Walt's empire remains, yet we somehow still remember and revere "the King of Kings" as we look on his work and despair.

Sweeping landscapes like the one in the episode "Ozymandias" echo shots in Western films, but Gilligan's setting in urban Albuquerque also makes his story contemporary and more relatable for modern viewers. The deserts outside Albuquerque fit Joe R. Lansdale's description of the "new" West, which

is not the Wild West but a stagnating contemporary southwestern locale; its heroes and villains are understated rather than flamboyant; the boundaries of morality [...] are blurred; and death becomes conflated with life. It is a land with a long, sometimes bloody history, where [...] the soil speaks of great floods and devastating wars [...]. The heat, stale air, gravel roads, and swamps rising up from nowhere permeate the narratives. Each grain of dust [...] plays a part in the author's construction of an undead tale that is inextricably intertwined with the West as "place." (cited in Miller and Van Riper 50)

Walt, his story, and the death that surrounds him are all inextricably tied to Albuquerque and the New Mexican desert. The color of the dirt in which he buries his barrels of money plays an integral part in Gilligan's construction of an "undead tale," and like Lansdale's grains of dust, the desert functions as an essential aspect of place for Walt. After finally capturing Walt, using a picture of a barrel of money buried in Hank's backyard (meant to imply that Jesse had found Walt's money), Hank tells Walt that Steve Gomez was concerned the dirt would look different. Yet, as Hank assures him, Walt's monstrous greed and anger prevent him from noticing such a small detail. However, it is not just any place in the desert that is important to Walt's story and

characterization; since Westward expansion began, the North American Southwest has symbolized freedom and opportunity and has been viewed as a place of self-reinvention (Van Parys x). Part of Walt's powerful appeal stems from his association with the southwest—he has roots in Albuquerque and the Western-era ideals it evokes—yet as an antihero he inhabits “revelatory peripheries, where crazed humanity meets unforgiving nature” (Van Parys 81). Transforming into Heisenberg, Walt inhabits this different place, whose danger yet irresistibility provides a glimpse into our wider, contemporary national identity. Just as “abandoned dreams call out from crumbling houses and hogans, broken signs, a desert aqueduct, fenced graves in stony terrain, steps leading nowhere” (84) in Van Parys's photographs, countless images in *Breaking Bad* foreshadow the show's ending, with its broken dreams⁵ and bloody deaths: the images of the RV, Walt's abandoned house (one that before was lost in the anonymity of a suburban, cookie-cutter housing development), the dingy CrossRoads motel where Wendy the meth-addicted prostitute does deals, and the run-down strip malls and shady fast food restaurants where Jesse sells their product represent poignant examples. Juxtaposed with beautiful but equally dangerous wilderness landscapes, these urban places remind us of the lesson of the West: only the most masculine, rugged, hearty men can survive in these remote, wild places. Geoffrey Batchen, in describing Van Parys's photography, evokes the neo-Western landscape:

Signs of human occupation always look temporary and out of place [...]. Indeed, the land appears so forbidding and desolate that it lends itself to a dark, fatalistic sense of humor, understandable given the very real possibility that hovers over everything of a parched and lonely death. (Van Parys 87)

⁵ Van Parys's “Spinning Wheel,” shot in New Mexico in 2001, provides a particularly poignant reflection of the image of Jesse on a merry-go-round in Season 5, Episode 10, “Buried.” In both shots, the playful innocence of the merry-go-round contrasts starkly with the lifeless landscape and, in Jesse's case, the lifelessness of the life he has been living.

Although his own mortality haunts Walt from the show's first episode, a parched and lonely death awaits almost everyone his life touches as he avoids it episode after episode. Yet the series also provides numerous instances of the dark humor Batchen describes, another factor contributing to the viewer's admiration for Walt. Brett Martin labels one example as "the most harrowing, grizzly, gleefully sanguine scenes ever to appear on television of any kind: a human body dissolved by acid in a bathtub [...], the acid subsequently burning through both tub and floor, so that the entire pink, swollen mess came crashing down in a magnificent *splooosh*" (269). The fact that this scene somehow manages to be equally repulsive and humorous speaks to its creator's and its characters' skill in imagining and inhabiting the spirit of the "West." Gilligan inscribes death on *Breaking Bad*'s landscape the same way death stains the plains of the most famous Westerns, and to many, the combination of death and dark humor make the show irresistible.

Along with the landscape that often serves as a backdrop to the violence, two scenes in particular showcase violence transformed into performance, allowing us to view *Breaking Bad* through a Western lens. In the final scene of Season 5, Episode 13, "To'hajiilee," the battle in the desert between Hank and Gomez on one side and Jack and his neo-Nazi henchmen on the other echoes the balletic shootouts characteristic of Westerns. Slow motion and sudden silences amid ear-splitting echoes of gunfire emphasize Hank's courage as he walks into the line of fire. After the flashback, "Ozymandias" picks up this scene with only the sound of gunfire over a black screen. Slowly, the bullet-riddled trucks fill the landscape from which Walt, Jesse, and the RV disappeared in the episode's cold open. The dust clears and the shot cuts to a close-up of Hank's hand, dripping with blood from the bullet wound in his leg, before turning to Gomez lying dead on the ground a few feet away. Minutes later, Jack ruthlessly shoots Hank, whose courage and

conviction forbid him from begging for his life. Perhaps the only true hero in *Breaking Bad*, Hank's is the only death that occurs outside the frame of the camera. After Jack shoots Hank, silence fills the soundscape as Walt falls to the ground. The first sound we hear is his defeated sobbing, which, in conjunction with his helpless situation, paints Walt in a more positive light compared to Jack and the other neo-Nazis' evil. Like Sam Peckinpah's Westerns, Gilligan's series super-imposes aesthetic "structures to provoke viewers into disturbingly ambivalent responses" (Prince xiv). Bringing the viewer level with Walt's grief-wrecked face resting on the ground as he lays with his hands tied behind his back, the camera focuses on his black, gaping hole of a mouth. Coupled with his agonizing cries, the abyss of his mouth moves the viewer to feel Walt's pain and regret for what has happened to his brother-in-law, again provoking us to shift Walt toward the "good" end of the spectrum, to desire his escape, and to hope for his redemption in spite of all the horror and violence he has perpetrated. Ultimately though, his responsibility for Hank's death quickly moves him toward cold-hearted outlaw again.

The moral ambiguity of "Ozymandias" prefigures that of the final scene, which captures all of Walt's crooked morality in another dramatic Western shootout. In addition, Walt saves Jesse's life, proving his loyalty despite previous plans to kill him. Gilligan artfully reveals his protagonist's courage, exceptional skill, and moral code, which, we are reassured, included faithfulness to Jesse all along. In Walt's mind, being killed in a battle he initiates, rather than by a disease he cannot control, helps restore his masculinity and heroism. Walt may even inspire awe in the viewer because of the fact that, in his final shootout and weakened by cancer, he singlehandedly kills five men, all of whom were more than capable of protecting themselves. This aspect of the scene also echoes a conventional Western trope in which a cowboy's skill with

a gun leads to an improbable defeat of equally skilled opponents. In the novel *The Shootist*,⁶ Glendon Swarthout tells the story of J.B. Books, a famous assassin who, like Walt, kills numerous men. But just as Walt cannot defeat his illness, the shootist's guns cannot help him against his most formidable opponent: a slow, agonizing death by cancer. Books, like Walt, engages in one final shootout, singlehandedly killing five men, some of whom are notorious outlaws who came to the saloon armed and with the invitation to kill him. Both Swarthout and Gilligan juxtapose brutal images of violence and death with images that romanticize and glorify it. The slow motion of bodies falling and bullets flying in the gunfight distances the viewer from the blood and the gore, slows down the pace, and refocuses our attention on the backward beauty of the antihero and what he has accomplished.

Walt's deviation from a Western hero like J.B. Books occurs in his last moment on screen. Indeed, Walt—like the Shootist—decides he would much rather die heroically than completely broken down by cancer, yet the episode ends before confirming his death and offering the viewer the resolution a cowboy's death or triumph generally provides. Only after Jesse's wild, joyful escape does Walt reveal his wound, which he has ignored until now. He walks into the meth lab to a background of sirens and wistfully gazes at the equipment of the life he loved. The soundtrack, featuring the song "Baby Blue" by British rock band Badfinger, reminds us of Walt's famous, beloved blue meth:

Guess I got what I deserve
Kept you waiting there, too long my love
All that time, without a word
Didn't know you'd think that I'd forget, or I'd regret

The special love I have for you
My baby blue. (lines 1-6)

⁶ *The Shootist* was also made into a 1976 film directed by Don Siegel and starring John Wayne in his final role (interestingly, cancer was killing Wayne at the time).

Although the lyrics seem to say Walt acknowledges that he got what he deserved, they also imply that his true loves are his meth, his “baby blue,” and his empire, not—as one might hope—his family. The lyrics speak directly to the meth Walt feels he has deserted, imploring it not to think he’d “forget” or “regret / the special love” he has for his product. Leaving a bloody handprint on a metal tank, Walt collapses as a tear falls from his eye. The camera pans upward, first focusing on Walt’s face and raw emotion, then giving us a spinning, bird’s eye view of his body on the ground as the police close in. This shot pays homage to a similar scene in Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver*, which Ray Merlock points out is “informed by and owe[s] debts to the iconography and themes of Westerns” (Rollins and O’Connor x). Most significantly, in the *Taxi Driver* scene, the protagonist, Travis, appears to be dead on the couch, but when the police enter, his movements show otherwise. When the camera pans up and starts to spin, like in “Felina,” the viewer cannot definitively say whether or not the man is dead. Were we assured of Walt’s demise, this part of the story, like so many others, would align with many traditional Westerns, in which the cowboy hero or antihero’s death transfigures him.

Many Westerns’ death scenes include Christ-like imagery that emphasizes the transfiguration of the hero, but this imagery is not prominent in the final scene of *Breaking Bad*. Peckinpah’s *Pat Garret and Billy the Kid* presents a striking example of crucifixion imagery through Billy’s death. Perhaps the most intensely emotional of Peckinpah’s violent scenes, Billy’s death takes place at the end of the film when Garrett finally catches up with him. Before his death, the film portrays Billy as the perfect embodiment of eroticized and romanticized Western masculinity. Framed by the doorway, he wears only jeans and a loaded gun hanging from the holster slung around his hips. This image works in tandem with Peckinpah’s slow-motion, stylized violence to make Billy’s death even more dramatic, traumatic, and painful for

the viewer. Garrett's gun thunders, as Bob Dylan describes it in his song lyrics for the soundtrack, shocking the viewer after such a quiet scene, similar to the effect of sound in Hank's death scene. A close-up on Billy's face, which displays shock as well as terrible pain as Garrett shoots him, incites the viewer's sympathy for Billy. The shattering of a glass mirror fills the soundscape as Billy's body crashes to the floor; Garrett has shot the mirror, as if to shoot himself for what he has just done. Just as we are appalled at the death of the antihero, Garrett too appears horror-struck, as if he regrets shooting him, despite Billy's unlawfulness. Billy's death transforms even Garrett's feelings toward him into rapture, and Garrett now sees Billy as a hero. To further this ambivalent response, Peckinpah places Billy in a crime scene that shows hardly any blood, especially in comparison to the scene of Ollinger's death and the following shootout earlier in the film. Instead of seeing Billy as a broken, bloody corpse, we see an image of his unstained, beautiful body. Peckinpah laces this image of a heroic death worthy of worship with religious symbolism. In the final shot, Billy's arms splay out on the ground, mimicking the pose of Christ on the cross. Walt's final scene in *Breaking Bad* noticeably lacks this religious symbolism: his arms are not quite spread out in a crucifixion pose, and the beams across the ceiling further divide his body, obscuring the image and splitting his dual persona even further. Unlike Peckinpah, who lets the camera linger on Billy's lifeless body, Gilligan does not give the viewer time to admire Walt before the camera begins its rotating ascent. Rather than restricting the scene's frame to keep the blood seeping from his wound outside the audience's view, the camera focuses on the dripping stain it leaves on the metal tank, and Walt's expression and the music evoke an overwhelming melancholy response, as opposed to the shock and horror expressed during Billy's death. Contrary to the antihero of Peckinpah's famous Western, Walt's

death does not transfigure or redeem him; rather his unconfirmed ending pushes him outside the conventional form of the Western genre.

Because of the ambiguity in *Breaking Bad*'s finale, here the similarities to Westerns end: overall, the series challenges the viability of Western values in modern American culture while simultaneously adhering to many of the genre's tropes. Though Walt fits with traditional Western themes, *Breaking Bad*'s culmination does not. Unlike the resolutions of traditional Westerns, which promise a return to justice either through the triumph or the sacrificial death of the hero, *Breaking Bad* spirals downward into greater destruction and offers no final consolation. Miller explains: "Western sagas do not rest until the moral order has been restored: evil vanquished, wildness conquered, transgression punished, and chaos contained" (58). *Breaking Bad*, which mirrors a Western saga in numerous other ways, provides no sure restoration of moral order or punishment of those who have transgressed, contradicting Miller's definition of the genre. We are left to question whether Walt lives or dies and whether or not he pays for his wrongdoings. Evil cannot be vanquished because, after the death of the neo-Nazis at Walt's hands, we cannot tell where or with whom the true evil really lies. Like in Joe Lansdale's new, "mashed up," supernatural West, *Breaking Bad*'s tales of "everyday men and the ways in which they struggle, suffer, carry on, triumph, and sometimes just die [...] are a bit more complicated. Often, we find that the big picture notions of 'good' and 'evil' are in fact meaningless" (Miller 58). *Breaking Bad* gives the viewer no clear moral, as many Westerns do—instead, it offers a warning. The importance of *Breaking Bad*'s divergence from the Western lies in the fact that America's fixation with everything about "the West," from its masculine heroes to its notions of liberty, justice, and the pursuit of happiness, elides the violence and tragedy inherent in these stories.

In an interview, Vince Gilligan called his show “a modern Western” about “a man alone against the horizon, being tested, testing himself, testing his mettle” (Romano), but I argue that beyond this, *Breaking Bad* cautions the viewer about the tragic implications of continuing to cherish American values that are so essential to the Western genre. Viewing *Breaking Bad* as a Western reveals its commentary on the continued significance of American Western ideals in contemporary national identity, but to do so, one must focus on its split protagonist, whose inability to remain in a fixed category as either a hero or an outlaw mirrors the viewer’s ambiguous feelings toward him. Like Peckinpah, who “was no doubt drawn to a critical approach which focuses on the *actions* of the central characters rather than on more abstract considerations such as tragic themes, tragic visions, or even tragic philosophies” (Simons and Merrill 4-5), Gilligan also presents a character who fits somewhere between the Western genre and the tragedy. Robert Heilman writes:

Tragedy should be used only to describe the situation in which the divided human being faces basic conflicts, perhaps rationally insoluble, of obligations and passions; makes choices, for good or for evil; errs knowingly or involuntarily; accepts consequences; comes into a new, larger awareness; suffers or dies, yet with a larger wisdom. (248)⁷

Walt’s basic, rationally insoluble conflict begins as a physical cancer but morphs into a sociological one. The conflict between his obligation to his family and his passion for ruling his meth empire dramatizes the larger problem of a failed ideal of American masculinity that has metastasized throughout our culture, provoking men like Walt into uncontainable violence. Yet the show’s ability to make the viewer admire Walt blinds us to these tragic implications. Simons and Merrill note that Peckinpah’s use of tragedy begins with an Aristotelian understanding as its guide to achieve the primary goal of making viewers “*feel* what his characters are experiencing” (4). Gilligan also achieves this goal, using Heilman’s expanded definition of tragedy and

⁷ Cited in Simons and Merrill, 5.

powerfully appealing to the audience to sympathize with Heisenberg, a Machiavellian prince-beast who in some ways seems more relatable than Walter White. Furthermore, as Heilman notes, the tragic figure has only to suffer *or* die, allowing space for tragedy within the ambiguity of Walt's final moments. Walt receives no larger wisdom, nor does he die sacrificially, nor does his capture and punishment restore order. Although the overall arc of *Breaking Bad* refuses to fit within the genre of tragedy any more perfectly than it fits into the Western, the fact that the viewer may root for Walt despite his severe violence and moral failings reveals tragic truths about what it means to be an American today. Instead of recounting one man's legend and the legacy he hoped to leave behind, *Breaking Bad* diverges from the Western narrative to show its audience not a mythic hero but a frightening reality about American notions of Western expansion, liberty, morality, and masculinity.

Unlike the restorative or at least sacrificial violence in Westerns, the violence in *Breaking Bad*, and specifically in "Felina," is not regenerative at all, but only destructive. Therefore, while *Breaking Bad* cannot escape the Western narrative and its trajectory of re-appropriation, it simultaneously challenges the validity and success of such tropes and meanings in contemporary America and its stories. Rather than reveling in the peaceful, if melancholy, end of many Western adventure stories in which the cowboy either dies or rides off into the sunset, we are instead left wondering whether *Breaking Bad*, with all its ties to American values, might indicate the ways in which this American story and its violence, so essential to our heritage and cultural imagination, might actually be a tragedy. In other words, *Breaking Bad*'s tragic yet uncertain ending brings us a bit closer to understanding what Walt's story of violent masculinity means for contemporary America: its stories of greedy men with crooked morality have not ended, nor has

their popularity waned. Thus, the only hope left in the wake of these stories is that that the “larger wisdom” might one day be ours.

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