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ALTAR CALL FOR WALTER WHITE? THE ABSENCE OF RELIGION IN *BREAKING BAD*

Abigail Fulton

When one thinks of rats stuck in a home, they generally think of them running rampant through the house creating chaos and destruction. No matter how hard we try to exterminate these destructive, annoying creatures, they continue to find ways to sneak in and create more damage. Christian writer C.S. Lewis uses this idea of a house full of rats in his book *Mere Christianity*, describing an ill-tempered man without God, and states, “the suddenness of the provocation does not make me an ill-tempered man: it only shows me what an ill-tempered man I am.” Therefore, an ill-tempered man is not someone who appears suddenly, it is part of our human nature that a lack of religion allows to seamlessly come to fruition.

Throughout the first and the beginning of the second season of *Breaking Bad*, this same concept can be applied to Walter White and the evil that escapes from within him when he is diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. The appearance of these rats is unprovoked and can affect anyone, similarly to cancer. In Walt’s case, his cancer holds a parallel to Lewis’s rats, leading to the destruction of Walter’s body in comparison to the destruction of a home. As Walt progresses from high school chemistry teacher through his new life of crime and meth-making, the viewer is in awe of the new person he is becoming -- left in wonderment of the idea that everyone can carry out the same malicious deeds, or refuse to, since most people hold themselves to higher moral principles. *Breaking Bad* not only explores the reality of confronting death and the power (or lack thereof) one faces, but also delves into producer Vince Gilligan’s perspective on the afterlife, believing there is no Hell to go to after death. As Gilligan states, “I want to believe there’s a heaven. But I can’t believe there’s a hell,” this viewpoint allows the characters to dive into their soulless, sinful human nature and live in a world with a lack of religion that allows sin to flourish.

Though Walter says he is cooking meth to provide for his family after he is gone, there is evidence to believe he is acting primarily on pride: one of the cardinal sins in Christianity. After living a life of drab, monotonous days with little to no change, dealing with death has created an altered persona within himself that allows him to feel pride in who he is and the power he holds in himself. Walter is often seen wearing a very dreary color of beige set off by a shade of green, which suggests that unlike many, Walter prides himself outside of the mundane. Instead of being prideful of his career and family, he becomes encapsulated by a life of crime. Additionally, the green

shade provides a subtle hint of the money that will eventually turn him into the full-fledged Heisenberg. When he is transformed into his persona Heisenberg, his drug kingpin alter ego, however, Walt's style changes drastically. He ditches the *boomer* outfit for a black coat, pork pie hat, and dark sunglasses symbolizing his newfound power (and control) he has in this new situation and even the power he comes to associate with death.

Walt's pride in dying is a direct parallel to a profound Christian principle: Jesus dying on the cross so no one would have to fear death. While Jesus conquered death so people could be free from sin, Walt's fear of death leads him to his ultimate demise and explains why he is never free. Pride is referred to as *The Great Sin* for a reason. C.S. Lewis states: "pride has been the chief cause of misery in every nation and every family since the world began... it was through pride that the devil became the devil." In this way, the viewer sees pride led to Walter's demise and the rest of his horrifying sins ranging from meth to murder. His unwillingness to accept treatment in the beginning and the refusal of charity from his rich friends are the catalyst for his demise. Walt's initial goal is noble. He wants to provide for his family, but as they say, the road to Hell is paved with good intentions, and Walt continues to walk this path through the entirety of the show.

In the same way pride fills Walter through his new hobby of cooking meth, *Breaking Bad* also illustrates the ways in which this new lifestyle gives him an identity he never felt before: self-motivated and powerful. While discussing cancer treatment with the family, Walt says, "My entire life it just seems I never ... you know, had a real say about any of it. Now this last one, cancer ... all I have left is how I choose to approach this" (1.5, 35:45) This helps allude to the idea that, despite a lack of religion throughout the show, Walt feels his life has been predetermined for him and he has had no choice over his path in life. Now facing death, he has given up any hope of God helping him. Now he has found his identity in the way he chooses to approach his final months. A new sense of identity for Walt becomes what Christianity deems as idols, consuming our entire attention and making us focus on less important things than our spiritual growth.

The Nobel Prize he wins is one such example. Even though his name was on the plaque, and he led the group of scientists who won it, something obviously came between Walt and the glory he felt he should have earned from this. During his final months on earth, Walter is finally reclaiming the title of leader he feels he deserves and making himself a man worth remembering as a noble family head. Although his actions go against what most would consider religious, he somehow plays off Christianity by making himself meaningful in the eyes of his bosses, which connects to the Christian perspective of all being important in the eyes of God.

As Walt finally finds an identity for himself in cooking meth and going against the standards of morality, he had set for himself, this becomes more easily understood when one notices Walter does not believe we truly have souls. In one scene, Walt is seen at a blackboard writing out the chemical composition of a human, but cannot figure out what the last, small percentage is. When his colleague Gretchen suggests that the last part of what makes someone a person is the soul, Walt turns and says, “There’s only chemistry here.” While this can be interpreted as a romantic gesture, it speaks to the science Walt believes in and that we are soulless creatures. This belief that we do not have a soul makes it easier for him to commit these terrible crimes, allowing him to slide deeper into breaking bad.

When Walter is sitting in his car weighing the pros and cons of killing his first victim, Krazy-8, the first item on the cons list is “Judeo-Christian Principles.” By this, there is evidence to believe that Walter acknowledges the principles of religion as being good and just, but with the belief that there is no soul to follow this, he has no problem turning away from these beliefs and normalizing the heinous crimes he commits against society. If he follows in Vince Gilligan’s footsteps and believes there is no hell, then perhaps the way Walter so easily gets away with all his crimes is supposed to allude to Gilligan’s idea that people will not be punished for eternity if they do not have a soul to punish.

While Walt continues down the path of soulless actions, leading to the demise of multiple people, it becomes evident there is a genuine lack of concern for human life and death that directly conflicts with most religious perceptions of life and death. From the very beginning of his murders, as Walt is writing out his list of advantages and disadvantages to murdering Domingo (Krazy-8), he is saying human life is not important, creating an inconvenience for himself. Walter even talks to Krazy-8 about his family and childhood in Jesse’s basement where Krazy-8 is held hostage, but the lack of human connection shows a disdain and lack of care for human life. Both parties were doing what they considered vital to their own life and put the other’s existence on the back burner, which continues to be illustrated throughout the show. In the final episode of Season 1, after meth dealing kingpin Tuco has brutally murdered his partner in crime No-Doze, another of Tuco’s men, Gonzo, is asked to dispose of the body. In addition to the total lack of regard for taking someone’s life, Tuco has no respect for the body he has completely dismantled. Gonzo even points out, “That don’t seem very Christian.”

Ironically, Gonzo is a Christian and ends up being brutally killed because he tries to properly bury the body. In the beginning of season 2, DEA agent and Walt’s brother-in-law Hank has a disturbing reaction to finding that Gonzo has bled out: he laughs while taking a picture with his

corpse. These scenes lie in stark contrast to religious perceptions of death where all human lives are important, and individuals should be respected whether in life or in death. While most world religions see death as a time that allows people to an eternity of prosperity and happiness, *Breaking Bad* sees murder as nothing more than an event that allows them to escape their actions and survive another day. Gonzo serves as a symbol that in this *Breaking Bad* world, religion leads to people's death and demise while immorality equates to success.

The perspective of death that is so prevalent in *Breaking Bad* also translates into the idea that people are too far gone to save themselves or change their lives. At the beginning of season 2, while Jesse and Walter are attempting to get Tuco to take the poison, Jesse asks Walt to jump at Tuco because he is going to die soon anyway. Walter has a loaded response stating: "Are you suggesting I do this because I only have a couple months to live, so my life doesn't matter anyways?" This quote not only represents another example of a lack of care for human life, but also encompasses the idea that their lives are too far gone to be saved at this point. This directly conflicts with the ideas presented in Christianity where any person from any walk of life can be saved if they repent of their sins and accept God into their lives. *The Breaking Bad* ideology rejects this idea that anyone can change if they are willing to accept that they are flawed, claiming people are doomed because eventually, evil will win over and the goodness they possess will be no match to our true, soulless human nature. The viewer can see this idea in more than one character: Hank's racist, insensitive conversations about criminals, Jesse's parents, and their belief that Jesse is unable to change at this point in life, and Walt's passion for chemistry spiral into a mass drug production.

It is no secret that *Breaking Bad* lives up to its name. The entirety of the show is centered around what humans are capable of when faced with death, which in turn leads people to abandon their morality -- religious or otherwise. Through producer Vince Gilligan's perspective on Walter's conception of the afterlife, this model of living makes sense: Why would someone choose to live justly if there will be no Hell to go to after death? This conceptualization of the world being merely physical and soulless allows people to go through the motions, abandoning what society has deemed "good and necessary" because in the end, everyone is made up of the same atoms as the person standing next to them. Though a dull, melancholy outlook on life, this perspective gives life to the characters in the show. By being faced with death and having no choice but to confront it, the characters are allowed the chance to conform to their true human nature and break the rules society has considered vital.

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