

Skyler, the Bad Wife? Gender and Agency in Breaking Bad.

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Introduction

Breaking Bad has a rich narrative that provides media and cultural theorists with many avenues for formal and textual analysis. As a crime drama, the series is a particularly fecund source of material for those interested in crime, deviancy and depictions of the moral and social order (Work:2014). The series clearly shares an affinity with a range of recent American dramas that have focused, in one way or another, on the lives of troubled men (*The Sopranos*, 1999-2007, *The Shield*, 2002-2008, *Dexter* 2006-2013, *Sons of Anarchy*, 2008-2014). Lotz (2014) in *Cable Guys* argues that such 'male-centred serials' enable us to "interrogate submerged sentiments about gender scripts that lurk beneath the surface of largely reconstructed masculinities" (2014:57). These reconstructed masculinities are an amalgam of traditional and post- feminist constructions of gender, holding to the idea of man as provider as well as equal partner and committed father. Lotz goes on to argue that in such narratives "women are spared blame, but gender roles are nonetheless implicated as a cause of men's problems" (2014:87). These problems "emerge from the realignment of gender norms that has connected with unintended or unrelated adjustments such as decline in the family wage and a considerable growth in basic fixed costs for US families". (2014:88). She goes on to reinforce the point that Walter White is a "family man who isn't dealt the hand in life that American mythology and American television typically affirm" (2014:97). If, however, we view the series from Skyler's perspective, we see that "Breaking Bad becomes a very different gendered tale, offering a melodramatic account of deception, adultery and ultimately an abusive, dangerous marriage" (Mittell 2015:254). Both interpretations of the narrative are valid, but it is important to recognise that the production of gendered meaning emerges in the relationships between the characters and in the shape of the narrative as a whole. This means that Walter White's actions may only be 'made to mean' through the presence of the 'other', both masculine and feminine. It is clear that gender is a site of tension within *Breaking Bad*, evidenced by the misogynistic paratextual discourse that surrounds the character Skyler White. This paper will try and provide some insight into the possible roots of such hatred and provide a contrapuntal discourse that allows us to add nuance to the dominant reading of Walter as the "decent, well-intentioned, by-the rules" (2014:97) family man who is pushed to the extreme.

Crime Drama

Breaking Bad sits within a generic field with many divisions and sub-divisions, (police procedurals, law and order tales, detective stories, gangsters, stories of transgression etc.). Despite this eclecticism, all crime narratives, to a greater or lesser degree, work through the relationship between the personal and the social, the individual and the collective. At its core, *Breaking Bad* is a study in transgressive individualism, but as we follow the actions of Walt into Heisenberg, we also witness an incremental flight from the social. This is shown in Walt's gradual disregard for his family, and in the rejection of the wider social norms symbolically embodied in Hank as a figure of law and order. *Breaking Bad* is not a tale about gangsters, but it does work through a key theme found within that generic sub-category. Nochimson (2002), in a discussion of *The Sopranos*, shows how the gangster genre addresses one of the key tensions found within American culture. She argues that the film *Public Enemy* (1931) "is an early example of the self-image of a culture awash in pious pronouncements about the value of both individualism and family which allows no way to integrate the blood ties of family with the isolating drive necessary to individuals bound for success" (2002:5). Eighty-five years later, we see this contradiction echoed in the narrative of *Breaking Bad*; the series foregrounds the tension between the individual desires of Walt/Heisenberg against familial constraint embodied in Skyler, and to a lesser degree, Hank. Skyler's attempts to ameliorate the impact of Walt's actions means that this constraint is largely coded as feminine; and it is the feminine that disrupts the viewers' ability to fully immerse themselves in the vicarious pleasures associated with Walt's transgression. As Nochimson (2002:4) states, tales of transgressive individualism "promote a complicated means for the audience to form an ephemeral, symbiotic relationship with voluptuous, perhaps masturbatory, lonely transgressive pleasures bearing on the disconnect between the group and the self". These narratives of transgressive individualism are predominantly narratives about men and as such, they play on ideas of male autonomy and freedom that are often associated with a flight from normative domesticity. Robert de Niro's line as Neil McCauley in *Heat* (1995) "Don't let yourself get attached to anything you are not willing to walk out on in 30 seconds flat if you feel the heat around the corner" occurs during a conversation about personal and domestic ties and perhaps exemplifies this sensibility. In holding Walter to account, Skyler challenges his actions and a wider culture that repeatedly produces romanticised narratives of male deviancy. Skyler's presence acts as a rejoinder to this myth and to the pleasures Walt experiences as a transgressor. This may be why Skyler's "presence serves as an irritant for some viewers" (Mittell, 2015:257) but perhaps it is in the working through of issues much closer to home that Skyler's contradictory place within the narrative comes into focus.

Public-Private Split

Skyler is not a passive wife; she calls Walter to account because of *her* expectations of family life. Her expectations are framed within an understanding of marriage and family as an equal partnership. This family dynamic challenges traditional patriarchal assumptions about gender and reflects the re-shaping of the social relations between men and women which has accompanied wider processes of social change. This process has resulted in a fracturing of the public/private split which had characterized gender relations throughout much of the late nineteenth and twentieth century. This split contained women within the private (domestic) sphere where fulfilment was achieved through motherhood and as the 'angel in the home', whereas men were defined as active agents of the public sphere. A range of gendered traits were aligned with this public/private split. Men were constructed as active, autonomous agents, as full social subjects capable of dealing with the competition, stresses and demands of public life. Women were defined as passive, emotional creatures, at the mercy of their biology and defined by their bodies. These gender dualisms were echoed in the cultural sphere, where the 'ways of seeing' (Berger: 1973), the act of looking at women, was linked to their perceived passivity and status as objects of the male gaze. Berger's (1973: 47) argument that "man acts, woman appears" speaks to this active/passive dualism, and remains valid as an account of the ways in which the idea of the feminine is constructed. As Jervis (1999:111) argues, "This conjunction of woman-as-object (*of control*, and desire) and woman-as-subject has implications for the construction of feminine self-hood". One key implication is the on-going struggle for women to be recognised as full subjects and active agents, both in the real world and in the cultural constructions of it.

Husbands and Wives

We are introduced to Walter and Skyler as a couple who appear to have negotiated this shift in gender roles in a relatively successful manner. Gretchen had described Walter as "a sweet, kind, brilliant man" (5:15) and this seems to be the man we meet in the first episode. He is married to Skyler who, from the opening scenes, appears to have an equal say in their relationship. We know that it has been some kind of happy marriage, as suggested by the flashback in '*Ozymandias*' (5:14) where, despite its context, there is clear affection and intimacy in Walt and Skyler's conversation. As the story develops however, we see that Walt is dissatisfied with his status and how he has lived his life so far. His transition into Heisenberg is constructed as a journey from passivity to agency, victimhood to autonomy. In contrast, Skyler travels in the opposite direction; she is reduced to the status of victim. Both journeys are a symbolic negation of the contemporary gender order. There is, as a result, a sense in which *Breaking Bad* may be read as reactionary tale, but this reading of the text is too narrow. If the concepts of agency and passivity, autonomy and victimhood are crucial to an understanding of

how traditional gender relations have been shaped, it is clear that *Breaking Bad* offers a complex rumination on the nature of current gender roles. The series challenges the dualisms attached to normative accounts of gender by depicting fluidity in the agentic status of all the main characters. It is possible to map the narrative trajectory of Walt, Skyler, Hank and Jesse along different and changing axis of passivity, agency, autonomy and victimhood. Walt, for example, becomes emboldened by his initial experiences of the drug trade, while Hank becomes emasculated by his. As Walt gains agency, Hank's is diminished. His experiences as a DEA agent cannot shield him from the violence engendered in the drug trade and the trauma he experiences has a direct impact on his masculine sense of self. Jesse moves from pole to pole, ultimately, from drug king-pin to shackled slave. This nuanced account of what it might mean to be a gendered subject, allows the series to address some key questions about the construction of masculinity and femininity today. The following sections will try and unpack this dynamic as it plays out in the relationship between Walt and Skyler, while remaining deeply conscious of the ways in which the narrative arc enables, for some viewers, the misogynistic hatred and vilification of Skyler White.

“You’re a pussy...”

At the beginning of the narrative, Walter White is presented as a character without agency, accepting what life throws at him with a passivity that is culturally coded as feminine. His wife challenges him on a decision to put \$15.88 on a credit card they do not use, placing her on an equal or perhaps dominant position within the household. In an effort to provide for their *unplanned* second child he works a second job at a car-wash, thereby stripping him of any social status he may have accrued as a teacher. At his 50th birthday party, Walt's domesticated conformity is contrasted with Hank's masculine bonhomie, and it is clear that Walt Jnr. is drawn to his Uncle's displays of masculine competence. The beige colour palette used to depict Walt's domestic environment reinforces this sense of drab conformity, and as a result, it is not much of a stretch to see Walter as an emasculated figure. This biography of conformity is confirmed in the scenes that accompany his initial collapse. We find out that he is a non-smoker, has never participated in any form of drug use and he eats a relatively healthy diet. These behaviours mark him out as an “undeserving” victim of cancer, reinforcing his put upon status within the narrative. Taken together, we are invited to see Walt as a passive victim of his life and his cancer. This passivity is reinforced by his response to the family intervention staged to encourage him to undergo treatment. He states, “But what I want, what I want, what I need is a choice. Sometimes I feel like I never actually ...make any of my own choices....I mean. My entire life...it just seems I never, you know, had a real say about any of it” (*Gray Matter* 1:5). He goes on, “Now, this last one, cancer...all I have left now is how I choose to approach this” but unbeknownst to his family, he

has already made choices, choices that lead him on the path to becoming Heisenberg. By the time of this intervention, Walter has stolen school equipment, cooked crystal meth and killed two men, but he has done nothing about his cancer. It is here that we begin to see the tension between passivity and agency play out. On one level he has 'accepted' his fate, a terminal cancer, but it is clear to the audience that he has also gained something from his response to it. From his "I am awake" in the pilot episode to "I'm not the same" (*Crazy handful of nothin'*, 1:6) he revels in the experiential thrills that criminality offers him. As Heisenberg, he becomes an active agent and this transition confirms the sense that, prior to this point, he has been existing, rather than living. His statement to Jesse that "there's more than one kind of prison" (2:8) provides an opening for the viewer to read an old story, domesticity and family as a fetter on the masculine.

"What happened to you?"

One may argue, however, that this presentation of Walter as a complete victim of fate is not strictly accurate. The above statements about his lack of choice encourage the audience to empathise with Walter, but this presentation of self is a partial account of a wider personal dynamic that has led to his unfulfilling suburban domesticity. We find out more about Walt as the narrative progresses, and it is clear that it is the consequences of the decisions he has made that he does not like. After his failed relationship with Gretchen he asked to be bought out of the fledgling company 'Gray Matter', *prior* to its success. It was *his* decision and one may suggest that this decision is linked to his inability to deal with this rejection/failure. This is reflected in the uncomfortable scenes between Walter and Gretchen that pepper season one. His sense of victimhood is reinforced by the fact that he sold his share in 'Gray Matter' for a measly \$5000 when the company is now worth billions. He feels he has been cheated of the financial and personal success he deserves. Instead of this future, he is working as a high school chemistry teacher without the wherewithal to provide for his family, or the capacity to be seen as a success. As he states in *Bit by a dead bee* (2:3) "I am an extremely over-qualified high school chemistry teacher. When I can work I make \$43,700 per year. I have watched *all of my colleagues and friends surpass me in every way imaginable* and within 18 months I will be dead". Walt's sense of failure is reinforced by the socio-structural constraints that belie the myths of the American dream, but it is important to recognise that his social position is also a consequence of the choices he *has* made. His commitment to a criminal career is about status and his own hubris, exemplified by Mike's response to the death of Fring. "We had a good thing you stupid son of a bitch. We had everything we needed and it all ran like clockwork. You just had to blow it up. You and your pride and your ego. You just had to be the man. If you'd done your job, known your place, we'd all be fine right now!"

“They want this guy like the axe wants the turkey”

Walt's journey from fumbling killer to Machiavellian murderer, is predicated upon this desire for status, to be seen to be good at something. In becoming Heisenberg, Walt gains the power, autonomy and status he feels he deserves. His ability to produce the 'purest meth' on the market, his skill as a chemist, finally provides him with the recognition he craves. His status as Heisenberg *the 'cook'*, is reinforced by the reputation he acquires as some sort of criminal mastermind, exemplified by the simultaneous murder of ten members of Mike Ehrmantraut's crew. While most of this violence is predicated upon the containment of crisis (neutralizing the threat of Crazy8, Tuco and Fring for example), there are other instances that demonstrate what the sensual dynamics of *being* Heisenberg actually mean to Walt. The death of Jane (2:12) and the poisoning of the young boy Brock (4:13) occur at different points in the narrative, but they both may be viewed as callous acts of manipulation that serve the strategic ends of Heisenberg. Jane's death is the symbolic marker of Walt's actual transition into Heisenberg, but it is in Walt's casual disregard for children, in the shape of Brock and Drew Sharp, that we see his complete disconnect from his earlier life and self-hood as a family man. This is in sharp contrast to Jesse who is emotionally crushed by the death of the young boy. Family may have been the catalyst for action, but it becomes increasingly clear that Walt uses 'family' to legitimise his actions to *himself*. By the time we get to *Blood Money* (5:9) his pious claims about family become increasingly difficult to swallow, and viewers' may share Hank's rejoinder to Walt, "You don't give a shit about family". In *Felina* (5:16) Walt confirms Hank's assessment, "I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it. And I was...really...I was alive". We should not look to Walt if we want to find some form of accommodation between the individual and the social, or some articulation of a modern masculinity. In the final analysis, we cannot escape the conclusion that it really was all about him. The pleasures *he* gains from criminality usurp the other demands on his identity and self-hood and the power he gains by being Heisenberg is gradually utilised to hold authority over his family. Mittell (2015:253) suggests that in Walter, the series "articulates the hollow, rotten core of traditional masculinity", but this may not be sufficient to counteract the narrative weight of point of view. We, as viewers, are encouraged to identify with Walter, to be allied with the transgressor. Heisenberg, as an outlaw, retains a form of cultural resonance that being Walter White does not. This resonance is coded in assumptions that have shaped modern ideas about masculinity, domesticity and criminality and Heisenberg remains some kind of hero, however tarnished and monstrous he may be.

Ways of Seeing

The difficulty of challenging the narrative weight of point of view is reinforced by the codes of production that dominate the storytelling process. As Dyer (2002:97) notes, “Many have argued that the devices used, the way the camera places us as voyeur, the way editing puts us into the position of the male, the way the narrative encourages us to identify with the man, compose the very basic storytelling grammar of mainstream film and television fiction”. As a story about a man who ‘breaks bad’, the series largely conforms to the storytelling dynamic Dyer alludes to. Skyler has a subordinate position in the narrative but it is also clear that Skyler is more than “an element of plot space” (De Lauretis in Dillman, 2014:6). She is a wife, but not a handmaiden relegated to the background waiting to service her man with food or sex. She is an intelligent woman who expects to be treated as an equal in her marriage and the workplace. If the catalyst for Walt’s actions is his cancer and his financial situation, the catalyst for Skyler is Walt. She reacts immediately to the change in his behaviour by calling him out on his lying, in, ‘*And the bag’s in the river*’ (1:3), she tells Walter, “Wherever you are why don’t you stay there tonight”. Her attentiveness to the shifts in his demeanour is linked to the assumptions she holds about the nature of their relationship and it is clear she expects the truth from Walt. In a crucial scene in ‘*Down*’ (2:4) Skyler takes him to task for his behaviour, “Ok so talk Walt. Shut –up and say something that isn’t complete bullshit. You want to know what you have to do. You have to tell me what’s really going on right now. Today, no more excuses. No more apologies”. Walt refuses to engage with Skyler, and after this confrontation, it is clear that she begins to make her own choices about her life and her relationship with Walt. His diagnosis grants him some leeway, but it is the cumulative effect of Walt’s lies (source of payment of his medical bills, missing the birth of their child, the second cell phone, Jesse, his erratic behaviour), that leads to the initial breakdown of their relationship.

Skyler gradually pieces together some version of the truth and in ‘*No Mas*’ (3:1), while serving him with divorce papers, she finds out how he has actually made his money. Their relationship see-saws back and forth following this, with Walt using a sense of masculine entitlement, accompanied by aggression, to wheedle his way back into the family home. It is the cartel’s hit on Hank that changes the nature of their relationship. Skyler connects the hit to Walt; “Somehow something tells me that Hank is here because of you and I’m not forgetting that.” (‘*Kafkaesque*’, 3:9) and because Hank and Marie *are family*, she comes up with the cover story to pay for Hank’s medical bills. This act of containment draws her into the orbit of Walt’s criminal activities. Her active role in acquiring the car wash and operating the money laundering scheme, demonstrates her desire to avoid the stereotype of the duped wife who knew nothing, as she states, Walt, I’m in this and if I’m in it I’m gonna do it right” (‘*Abiquiu*’, 3:11). Their relationship reaches some sort of fragile equilibrium until it becomes

clear that Walter cannot protect his family from the violence engendered in the drug trade. In the aftermath of the crisis with Fring, their relationship completely disintegrates and Skyler becomes increasingly preoccupied by how she can protect her children *from Walt*. In this tussle over their children, Skyler becomes more acquainted with the Walt that is Heisenberg. This leads to a number of key scenes, particularly in the episodes '51' (5:4) and 'Ozymandias' (5:14), that play on traditional gender tropes, and illustrate the extent to which Skyler has been diminished by Walter's transition in to Heisenberg.

"I learned from the best"

In some respects, Skyler follows a parallel path to Walt, but her journey is more difficult to assess. This may be because she occupies an unusual position in the narrative. She is not a cop or detective, she is not the 'extra' body to be looked at and she is not a Carmela Soprano who exists in a state of knowing ignorance. She refuses to be the passive wife and struggles to retain her own agency and autonomy as Walt's actions, contrary to his claims, lead to the dissolution of their family. Her attempt, as a wife, to challenge Walt goes against the grain of this genre; in tales of transgressive individualism, women, especially wives don't really get in the way. She is not an Abby Donovan, (*Ray Donovan*, 2013 - current) who has, so far, played a more passive, and therefore, traditional version of the wife. Instead, Skyler acts up herself, and spends a significant amount of time challenging her husband's actions. In playing to another script, Skyler fails to know her place, and her efforts to contain Walter may be read in misogynistic terms. By refusing to grant Walt the complete freedom he desires, she is the irritant, the harridan, getting in the way of Heisenberg and the *real* story. Furthermore, it is clear that in her own forays into deviant behaviour, (the dumb blonde who knows nothing about bookkeeping, her plan to buy the car-wash), Skyler experiences similar experiential thrills to Walt, but we are unable to read her actions in the same way. The cultural cachet attached to male deviancy is not socially or culturally available to women. Women's deviancy is often coded as inauthentic, or perceived as a display of 'flawed' femininity and Skyler ends up straddling both interpretations. She feels she has been "compromised" by her actions with Beneke ('51', 5:4) and is no longer a good mother to her children. Furthermore, she cannot match Walt; she says so herself, "I don't have any of your magic Walt" ('51', 5:4). But the key difference is she cannot disconnect, she is a figure whose actions *are* predicated on preserving her immediate and extended family, and in this she is playing a traditional gender role. She is not wrapped up in the sensual dynamics of crime, and unlike Walt, she knows a "bullshit rationale" when she hears one ('51', 5:4). It is in this episode (51), that Skyler admits some kind of defeat. She simulates a breakdown in an effort to get the children away from Walt, but acknowledges that this plan will fail. She admits that she doesn't know what to do. "I'm a coward. "I can't go to the police. I

can't stop laundering your money. I can't keep you out of this house. I can't even keep you out of my bed". She goes on to say that the only thing she can do is wait for his cancer to come back. Her defeat places her in a role she has struggled to avoid, that of victim, and her sense of entrapment means her complicity is ensured until the inevitable endgame.

It is in the scenes after Walt's exposure as Heisenberg and the death of Hank, that we see the series openly play through the contradictions in the gender order. Hank automatically assumes the default position, that Skyler has been a victim of Walt, and he cannot conceive of a situation where Skyler would be actively implicated in his crimes. Her reluctance to talk and Walt's production of the DVD implicating Hank as Heisenberg offers a momentary respite, and it is significant that it is Jesse, rather than Skyler who 'rats' on Heisenberg. In the frantic scenes in '*Ozymandias*' (5:14) that follow the death of Hank and Steve Gomez, we see the gendered versions of the world that Walt/Heisenberg has been struggling with come to the fore. Walt and Skyler end up in a violent tussle with a knife, and it looks as if Walt might kill Skyler, as Flynn intervenes, Walt yells, "What the hell is wrong with you we're a family!!!" Following this deluded statement, Walt flees with their 18-month old daughter in tow, leaving Skyler crying helplessly on the road. Later in the episode, Walt makes a call to the family home and in this call he suggests that Skyler is a blameless but disobedient wife. This is a noble act; it is an attempt to protect Skyler from the consequences of their actions and it may be read as a re-iteration of his true feelings toward her. But the meaning of the call is double-coded, both Walt and Heisenberg are present, but it is Heisenberg that comes to the fore. The emotive nature of the call means that the sentiments expressed here over-ride the intent of the call. If we add the wider context of Walt's journey, we see his anger and frustration spill out. Crucially, in this scene, Walt has around 30 lines and Skyler has around 10 clipped responses, she actually says very little, she just stands there and takes the abuse. Her relative passivity, confirms the intent of the call and reinforces her status as a victim. The following statements provide some sense of the nature of this 'conversation'. "What the hell is wrong with you? Why can't you do one thing I say? This is your fault. This is what comes of your disrespect. You know, you never believed in me. You were never grateful for anything I did for this family. He goes on to mock her, continuing with, You're always whining and complaining about how I make my money...just dragging me down while I do everything. And now, now you tell my son what I do. After I told you to keep your mouth shut. You stupid bitch. How dare you? ('*Ozymandias*', 5:14). For those who read Skyler as the interfering harridan, the sentiments expressed in the aforementioned scene may be readily co-opted into a misogynistic discourse about women. It is clear that *some* viewers respond to this and gain pleasure from it, as evidenced by the "violent, misogynistic hatred" (Mittell 2015, 347) meted out to Skyler through social media.

Endings

It is, however, important to recognise that the series contains both progressive and reactionary discourses about women, and it is in the play between them that meaning is produced. It is possible to suggest that the response to Skyler may be read as an indication of a contradiction, whereby *some* viewers' simultaneously both recognise and refuse her agentic status within the narrative. Skyler's refusal to adopt a passive role ensures that she may not be added to the army of mute and sexualised women that pepper the genre, and perhaps this is her 'crime'. Furthermore, her confrontations with Walt make it difficult for the audience to be completely seduced by the aura of Heisenberg's criminality, and it is in this, as much as anything else that *Breaking Bad* provides a counterpoint to many such tales of transgression, where the depiction of female agency would be as welcome as a stone in one's shoe.

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