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Josette Baer

## Walter White: From «Apply Yourself» to «Say my Name». Aspects of Political Theory in *Breaking Bad*

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This essay is dedicated to Vince Gilligan:  
Yo, chapeau, man!

### Introduction

This essay should be understood as an inquiry into the very successful US TV series *Breaking Bad* (BB).<sup>1</sup> I use political theory analysis and plot analysis as textual analysis of the story.<sup>2</sup> In the first chapter, I present a summary of the story of Walter White. In the second chapter, I analyse BB according to Thomas Hobbes' (1588–1679) *Leviathan*.<sup>3</sup> What Hobbes meant with his famous saying that man is man's wolf (*homo homini lupus*),<sup>4</sup> thus a deadly reciprocal

- <sup>1</sup> Basic information about *Breaking Bad* on <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0903747/>; accessed 6 February 2021. The abbreviation I chose for *Breaking Bad* (BB) is, by my generation and in Europe, commonly understood as the initials of Brigitte Bardot (\*1934), one of the great beauties of French cinema. In this paper, BB is the abbreviation for *Breaking Bad*. Cooking has never been a principal asset of Brigitte Bardot.
- <sup>2</sup> As I am no trained professional in psychology, Todd Grande's YouTube channel taught me a lot. See Grande on the personality of Walter White: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8zrBZezqo\\_Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8zrBZezqo_Y); accessed 10 February 2021.
- <sup>3</sup> I quote from Thomas Hobbes: *Leviathan*, ed. by Richard Tuck, 2nd revised student edition, Cambridge 1996.
- <sup>4</sup> Hobbes' «war of all against all», on <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hobbes-moral/>; accessed 7 February 2021.

threat of all against all comes to life in Walter becoming a full-fledged criminal, with murder and deception the tools of his new craft. Walter is breaking bad,<sup>5</sup> violating societal norms and ethical values, relentlessly pursuing his plans of making money for his family and enjoying his new role as a provider. The third chapter is dedicated to an analysis of how Hannah Arendt's (1906–1975) definitions of power, strength, authority, violence and judgement<sup>6</sup> apply to the characters in BB. In the conclusion, I shall answer the following research questions: First, why is the global public still so smitten with Walter White? Second, what can one learn from BB for our contemporary *conditio humana* in the 21st century? Third, is Walter White the master of his life, thus self-determined (*Selbstbestimmung*), or is he dominated by forces outside of his own free will (*Fremdbestimmung*)?

## 1. Breaking Bad – Summary of the Plot

When I purchased my first iPad in the summer of 2015, I discovered Netflix and subscribed, overwhelmed by the wide offer of films, series and documentaries. I had never heard about the series *Breaking Bad*; anything to do with drugs was not my thing.

On the web, a few months into Netflix, I spotted Sir Anthony Hopkins' (\*1937) open letter to actor Bryan Cranston (\*1956), who had played Walter White.<sup>7</sup> My first viewing of the five series took me about six months. Back in 2015, I was busy with a book project and did not have the energy and time to engage with the content.

<sup>5</sup> An explanation of the series' title by Vince Gilligan on <https://screenrant.com/breaking-bad-show-title-meaning/>; 8 February 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt: On Violence, in: *On Violence*, Harvest 1970, 3–87; Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship, in: *Responsibility and Judgment*, New York 2003, 17–48.

<sup>7</sup> Sir Anthony Hopkins' open letter on <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2013/10/anthony-hopkins-breaking-bad-fan-letter>; accessed 6 February 2021.

Yet BB had cast a spell on me, asking me to watch it again. So, I did in January 2021, prior to Switzerland's second lockdown.

My second viewing was a revelation. In the mornings, while skiing down the slopes, enjoying the snow, the cold air and the ice, my mind was in sunny Albuquerque. While scratching the snow off my skis, poles and boots, I was thinking of New Mexico's deserts, rattle snakes, tarantulas and the hilarious 1980s van. In the afternoons, I rewatched all 62 episodes. Let me now summarize the series' content. Naturally, I have to be brief here, since a detailed presentation involving all characters and the plot's sub lines would require a book in its own right.

The pilot S1:E1 introduces the main characters. It is the morning of Walter's 50th birthday; he has breakfast with his pregnant wife Skyler and teenage son Walter junior, who is 13 or 14 years old. Walter, further referred to as Walt, is a chemistry teacher at an Albuquerque high school and member of the school's Science Faculty. Skyler, who does not work, is trying to get published as an author of short stories; as we later learn, she has a professional past as an accountant. Walt jun., who later in the series insists on being called Flynn, an attempt to find his own identity, is handicapped with cerebral palsy.<sup>8</sup> Junior walks on crutches and his speech is somewhat slurred, but the illness does not affect his intellectual faculties, as he is a student at his father's high school. The Whites' closest relatives are Skyler's younger sister Marie and her husband Hank Schrader, a DEA agent. Hank, humorous, loud and self-assured in his masculinity, is the opposite of the quiet, non-assertive, slightly depressed and polite Walt. When she is not working as a radiation assistant in a clinic, Marie indulges in shoplifting.

To make ends meet, Walt works at a car wash after school. On his 50th birthday, he does overtime at the car wash because his boss Bogdan is once more understaffed. While Walt is polishing a car, which belongs to one of his students, the rich kid immediately takes a picture, probably to put it on his social media site. Humiliation

<sup>8</sup> See a description of the illness and its symptoms on <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/cp/facts.html>; accessed 8 February 2021.

and the cruelty of others seem to follow Walt around. He comes home late, dead tired and has to be a good sport, because Skyler has arranged a surprise birthday party for him. The house is full of Hank's DEA colleagues and their wives, and Hank makes fun of Walt, whose intelligence he admires, but whom he does not really consider a man; he can barely hold the Glock Hank hands to him. They switch on the local news where Hank appears in uniform, informing the public about the liquidation of a meth<sup>9</sup> lab. Walt sees the weapons and bundles of dollars the DEA agents have confiscated and asks Hank about the money. More or less 700,000 dollars, is the answer. Hank, flattered that his intelligent brother-in-law is interested in his work, offers to take him on a DEA operation.

On the next day, Walt is rolling a barrel of washing solution at the car wash when he gets dizzy and falls down. After a check-up at the hospital, the physician tells him that he has inoperable lung cancer, and with chemotherapy a couple of years to live. He hides the cancer from Skyler and Walt jun.

As he promised, Hank takes Walt on a DEA operation together with his partner and friend Steven Gomez, known as Gomi; the three are waiting in their car outside a house because the DEA got a tip from a snitch that somebody is cooking crystal there. When the DEA agents storm the house, cook Emilio is arrested, but his associate manages to escape. Walt immediately recognizes him: it is his former student Jesse Pinkman. Jesse was such a lousy student that Walt had once graded his failed written exam with the words: «Ridiculous! Apply yourself!»<sup>10</sup> At night, Walt, who has looked up

<sup>9</sup> Crystal meth on <https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/addiction/crystal-meth-what-you-should-know#1>; accessed 8 February 2021.

<sup>10</sup> BB, S1:E4 «Cancer Man», position 13:48. Netflix's counting system in minutes and seconds starts from the end, thus the position 13 minutes and 48 seconds indicates that 13 minutes and 48 seconds are left to the end of the episode. Walt's «Apply yourself» has become an iconic quote of pop culture, translated into many languages:

Jesse's address in the school's register, surprises him in front of his house, which belonged to his aunt who had died of cancer.

Walt blackmails Jesse into cooking, threatening to turn him in. Jesse has the contacts for distribution, and Walt can cook the purest crystal in town. They pair up, buy a recreational van, constructed in the 1980s, kit it out as a mobile lab and start cooking in the desert. Jesse offers local meth dealer Krazy-8 their product. Walt has no experience with physical brutality and is shocked when Krazy-8 and his cousin Emilio, who is free again,<sup>11</sup> threaten to kill him and Jesse. He trades his and Jesse's life for teaching them how to cook the purest crystal; yet Walt does not cook crystal, he produces mustard gas which knocks out Emilio and Krazy-8. The sirens he can hear coming nearer convince him that it is over, that he will be arrested. But it is only the fire fighters who are approaching to douse the fire in the desert that Emilio's cigarette has ignited. The pilot ends with Walt crawling into the marital bed; his self-esteem and masculinity somewhat restored, he has passionate sex with Skyler who is surprised by his vigour.

In S1:E5 «Grey Matter», we learn that Skyler has asked Walt's former associates Elliott and Gretchen Schwartz for financial help. At their lavish party in their luxurious mansion, Elliot first offers Walt a job at Grey Matter; he should come back, since they need a creative and scientific new mind on board. Walt declines. He had invented not only the company's name Grey Matter but sold his shares for a \$5000 down payment some 30 years ago. By now, the Grey Matter shares are worth billions. Gretchen and Elliot did not force him to sell his shares, but he nevertheless resents them and their wealth. His pride does not allow the Schwartzes to pay for his cancer treatment either and he is coming under pressure to hide the cooking from Skyler.

[https://www.reddit.com/r/breakingbad/comments/zzwk8/jesses\\_old\\_chemistry\\_paper\\_graded\\_by\\_walt/](https://www.reddit.com/r/breakingbad/comments/zzwk8/jesses_old_chemistry_paper_graded_by_walt/); accessed 9 February 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Shady lawyer Saul Goodman aka Jimmy McGill got Emilio out; Saul is introduced in S2:E8 «Better call Saul». The series with this title is the prequel of BB, telling the story of Saul Goodman. At the time of writing, we are waiting for the final series 6.

Albuquerque's crystal meth community is crazy about Walt's product: 99.1% pure crystal that comes in a clear blue colour.<sup>12</sup> Since Emilio and Krazy-8 have vanished, the former dissolved in Jesse's bathtub, the latter buried in the desert, Tuco Salamanca is now the main wholesaler-distributor. Establishing himself in the drug world to increase production, distribution and revenue, Walt puts Tuco in his place, taking revenge for Jesse's brutalization by Tuco's thugs when Jesse had insisted on being paid up-front. In a crucial scene of S1:E6 «Crazy Handful of Nothin'», we see a different Walt: his head is shaven and instead of his former teacher's attire in boring beige and a 1970s moustache he is now wearing black clothes, a black hat and sporting a hip goatee. Walt definitely looks dangerously up to date and milieu. Jesse's peers Skinny Pete and Badger probably would have complimented his new look with «yo, awesome, man!»

In Tuco's office, Walt demands the money for the crystal Tuco stole from Jesse and an additional sum for Jesse's medical treatment. Tuco, who probably would score highly on Robert Hare's psychopathy checklist,<sup>13</sup> makes fun of Walt, assuming that what he has put on his table is a handful of crystal. He asks for his name, and Walt replies: «Heisenberg», knowing that none of the barely literate gangsters would possibly know who Heisenberg was.<sup>14</sup> Tuco's capacity for logical thinking is diametrically opposed to his physical brutality: why would Heisenberg come to ask for money and bring more crystal? Walt icily replies that that is not crystal, throws some shards on the floor at the window and bang, a huge explosion! Nobody dies, but the office is in a shambles. This convinces Tuco of Heisenberg's ruthlessness and determination, which demands respect in what is left of Tuco's crystallized brain. All the more so as

<sup>12</sup> BB, S1:E7 «A No Rough Stuff Deal».

<sup>13</sup> See

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318596156\\_Hare\\_Psychopathy\\_Checklist\\_PCL](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318596156_Hare_Psychopathy_Checklist_PCL); accessed 9 February 2021.

<sup>14</sup> BB, S1:E6 «Crazy Handful of Nothin'», position 6:07. A portrait of Nobel Prize winner Werner Heisenberg (1901–1976) can be found on

<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/physics/1932/heisenberg/biographical/>; accessed 9 February 2021.

stupid, paranoid and brutal Tuco can make lots of money with that Heisenberg. They conclude a business agreement up front.

Since they are afraid of Tuco's brutality, Walt and Jesse try to poison him, but Hector Salamanca, who is in a wheelchair and communicates with a little bell, warns his nephew. Tuco is about to shoot Walt and Jesse when Hank arrives. They hide in a ditch, and Hank shoots Tuco. The elimination of Krazy-8 and Emilio by the two cooks is only the beginning of what will become a killing rampage worthy of a very effective serial killer. I reckon, by the end of the last episode, Walt has killed at least 25 to 30 persons, with his own hand and by paying contract killers.<sup>15</sup>

A further gripping episode demonstrates Walt's intelligence and professional acumen: in S2:E9 «4 Days Out», they are cooking in the desert. The van's battery is empty, because Jesse has made a mistake. For four days, they are stuck in the desert, the nights ice-cold and the days hot. Eventually, on Jesse's insistence, Walt constructs a new battery, which saves their lives.

The story of Walt and Jesse continues in a slow and painful moral descent, a Nietzschean abyss: «He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster. And if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee.»<sup>16</sup> Is Walt fighting the monster in himself? No, Walt does not see himself as a monster. He enjoys how his life is changing, the money he is making, because to his way of thinking, his motivation is ethical: he is providing for his family. Walt is first and foremost a scientist; if

<sup>15</sup> Correlation is not the same as causality. Walt is not responsible for Jane's grief-stricken father's mistake that caused the plane crash with some hundreds of dead. Nobody forced Jane's father to go back to work while mourning. A somewhat superficial body count of the series' main characters can be found on [https://breakingbad.fandom.com/wiki/List\\_of\\_killings\\_by\\_main\\_characters](https://breakingbad.fandom.com/wiki/List_of_killings_by_main_characters); accessed 9 February 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche: *Beyond Good and Evil*, chapter IV, Apophthegms and Interludes, no. 146 <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4363/4363-h/4363-h.htm>; accessed 9 February 2021.



asked, he probably would justify his criminal activities with Darwin's survival of the fittest.<sup>17</sup> He is adapting to this abject part of society, the criminal underworld that is his money-making pool, because to adapt means to survive. The more crystal Walt cooks, the more money he makes, the more self-confident he becomes. The more self-assured he becomes, the easier he lies, making up convincing stories on the spot, without remorse. Falsehoods, after all, protect him and his family. The lies he tells Skyler, who feels that he is hiding something from her, seem to be like new clothes for Walt, in which he can hide and dress at the same time.

As for the second part of Nietzsche's apophthegm: the abyss is the criminal underworld, embodied by desperate junkies, sociopathic drug bosses, despicable white supremacy gangs and seemingly respected members of the community such as Gustavo Fring, the owner of the fast-food chain Pollos Hermanos. These characters are the abyss, and they are gazing back at Walt, eventually drawing him in.

When their team grows bigger, with Mike Ehrmantraut, who was Gustavo Fring's corporate security officer, now in charge of the business side, and Todd Alquist helping in the production line, Walt comes up with a brilliant idea: houses infected with vermin and insects need an extermination company to gas out the unwanted guests. Under the cover of the company, since the families have to leave their houses for a couple of weeks, Walt's team cooks in those houses, thereby moving production every few weeks to a different place, avoiding detection by the DEA.<sup>18</sup>

Walt has established himself fully in S5:E7: concluding a distribution deal with Declan and his gang, who control the meth market in Phoenix, Arizona, he asserts his strength and reputation, forcing his will on to Declan: «Say my name!»<sup>19</sup> Declan finally caves in to Walt's icy gaze, replying: «Heisenberg», admitting thus that not

<sup>17</sup> Darwin's theory of evolution on <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letters/darwins-life-letters/darwin-letters1866-survival-fittest>; accessed 10 February 2021.

<sup>18</sup> BB, S5:E3 «Hazard Pay».

<sup>19</sup> BB, S5:E7 «Say my Name», 41:30.

only has he heard of Heisenberg in Arizona, but that Heisenberg is the kingpin in Albuquerque's meth business, hence controls the New Mexico market. In the same episode, Walt kills Mike, tying up a loose end. Sitting on the banks of the Rio Grande, looking at the slowly flowing water, Mike is fatally wounded and so fed up with Walt's ego that the only thing he has to say is: «Shut the f... up and let me die in peace.»<sup>20</sup>

After Todd, his Uncle Jack and his gang of white supremacists have stolen Walt's money and shot Hank and Gomi in the desert, Walt has to flee. He goes to ground with the help of Ed, the «disappearer», and spends a few months in a cabin in snowy New Hampshire, the Granite State. He is lonely. His desperate attempt to speak to Flynn on the telephone in a bar ends with his son shouting at him that he has killed Uncle Hank and he wants nothing to do with him. In the last episode S5:E16 «Felina», Walt returns to Albuquerque. It is his 52nd birthday, and he has breakfast at Denny's, arranging the bacon on his eggs sunny side up and hash browns the way Skyler used to do; he breaks the fried bacon into pieces and forms the number 52 on the plate. His cancer has returned, his hair has grown back, and he leaves the remainder of his money, some \$9,720,000, with Gretchen and Elliot Schwartz. He presses them into taking care of the money for Flynn and baby daughter Holly. To make sure that they will arrange for a trust fund for his children and use only his money, he threatens them: at his signal, two red lights are directed on to Elliot and Gretchen's bodies from outside, and they naturally think the red lights are infrared from snipers' rifle scopes. Walt tells them that he has hired «the two best hitmen west of the Mississippi»;<sup>21</sup> if they do not keep their promise, the hitmen will kill them one day. In the car, Walt pays off Badger and Skinny Pete who have put some harmless red lights on the Schwartzes.

In their last five minutes together, Walt admits to Skyler, who has moved to a cheaper house with the children, what she had always suspected: his descent into criminality had nothing to do with his

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 1:30.

<sup>21</sup> BB S5:E16 «Felina», 40:39.

motivation to provide for the family. He enjoyed it and he was good at it; the criminal life made him feel alive. In a heart-breaking scene, Walt says good-bye to sleeping Holly, stroking her cheeks. From afar, he sees his son Flynn coming home from school for the last time.

At night, he takes revenge, killing Uncle Jack and his gang in their club house with an M-60 he has mounted on his car, activating the machine gun with his car key. Todd is the only one to survive. Jesse, whom the gang had abducted, kept in a dungeon and made a crystal-cooking slave, survives thanks to Walt who pulls him down to the floor; Jesse asphyxiates Todd with the chains of his handcuffs. Walt asks Jesse to shoot him, but Jesse refuses: he should do it himself. Jesse flees in a car.<sup>22</sup> The once infamous and brutal Heisenberg walks into the lab on Uncle Jack's premises, deadly wounded by a bullet of his M-60. The lab is professionally equipped. One can hear police sirens approaching. We see a slight smile on Walt's face when he touches the polished equipment. Police cars are arriving. He collapses, leaves his bloody handprint on one of the metal cylinders and dies in the lab, feeling at home and, perhaps, finally at peace.

## 2. Aspects of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* in BB

What is the connection of BB with Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*? Let me first present a brief summary of Hobbes' theory and then move on to interpret one major plotline, a keystone in Walt's criminal development: the elimination of Gustavo Fring.

Like all contract theories<sup>23</sup> after Hobbes, such as Samuel von Pufendorf's (1632–1694) *De officio hominis et civis juxta legem naturalem libri duo*, John Locke's (1632–1704) *Of Civil Government, Book Two*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712–1778) *Contrat Social* and John Rawls' (1921–2002) *Theory of Justice*, *Leviathan* is a thought experiment,

<sup>22</sup> Jesse's escape to Alaska is the theme of *El Camino*, a BB film.

<sup>23</sup> For contemporary approaches see <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/contractarianism-contemporary/>; accessed 10 February 2021.

inquiring about the rights of the sovereign, the rights of the citizens and why they should enter into a contract with the sovereign. The contract is the only ethical way of establishing political rule, since it is based first, on the empirical fact that political authority, not claims to be in possession of the truth, makes law; second, that citizens entering into a contract with the sovereign do this out of their own free will, thus on the basis of choice; and third, that it is rational to enter into a contract with the sovereign. For the majority of the citizens, it is reasonable and preferable to consent to political order than to continue living in anarchy.

Since he possesses political strength and the means of violence, i.e. the army, a dictator can force citizens to enter into a contract with him, but that would be a futile act, since such a contract would not be a real one, as the citizens would be bereft of choice. Also, the crucial element of rationality would be missing. Furthermore, a dictator does not need a false contract, as he already has the political strength, with which he governs, unbound by citizens' consent. A contract that is forced upon citizens is nothing more than pseudomoral window-dressing of tyrannical or totalitarian rule.

Hobbes witnessed the English Civil War (1642–1651) and the cruelties and injustice it afflicted on the citizens; in his Paris exile, he wrote *Leviathan*. Naturally, the main theme of BB, Walt's descent into evil, has not much in common with *Leviathan*, save for an excellent illustration of two principal aspects: the element of anticipation and the state of nature.

*Anticipation:* Hobbes' realistic view of man is based on anthropological equality, which creates a situation of equal and reciprocal potential of threat. Men are equal in their faculties of body and mind; the weakest is strong enough to kill the strongest, either with a cunning plan or in cooperation with other weak men.<sup>24</sup> An example: how can a man who looks like Woody Allen kill a man who looks like Arnold Schwarzenegger? The weak one can poison the strong, kill him in his sleep or kill him in cooperation with others. From this

<sup>24</sup> T. Hobbes: *Leviathan*, 86–87.

anthropological equality springs the equality of hopes and goals, the situation when two men desire the same thing:

And from this diffidence of one another, there is no way for any man to secure himself, so reasonable, as *Anticipation*; that is, by force or wiles, to master the persons of all men he can, so long, till he see *no other power great enough to endanger him*.<sup>25</sup>

This equality of men and their potential threat to each other leads us to Hobbes' *state of nature*, the basis of his contract theory. The state of nature is anarchy, the absence of political order: no industry, no navigation, no building, no geography, no arts, no literature, no society. What rules is the permanent fear of each individual and the danger of a violent death for everybody.

And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.<sup>26</sup>

The state of nature is war of all against all, and because of the absence of law, power and order, man has to be wolf to others to defend his life, family and property:

To this *warre of every man against every man*, this is also consequent, that nothing can be Unjust. The notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice have there no place. Where there is *no common Power*, there is no Law; where *no Law*, *no Injustice*.<sup>27</sup>

Where there is no law, there are no rights. I can rob anybody anytime, and also kill anybody anytime without fearing punishment. Man's life is worth nothing without law, and only a sovereign can establish order. He who can gain political power is the future sovereign; if he is capable of convincing armed citizens to follow him and consent to his future role as sovereign, he can set the basis of negotiation with citizens for a social contract. If there is nobody capable of or willing to become the future sovereign, the state of war continues. From this follows that peace is a result of sovereign power.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 88, italics by me.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 90, italics by me.

Anarchy, war of all against all and anticipation as a means of survival is the state of Albuquerque's criminal underworld, which Walt joins of his own free will. In S2:E11 «Mandala», Gustavo Fring enters the story; apparently, as one later learns, he was born in Chile, moved to Mexico and from there to the USA. Gus's fast-food chain Pollos Hermanos is doing well, and Gus seems to be a decent and friendly citizen with perfect social manners who sponsors the DEA's annual charity run, sits on the boards of hospitals and can be seen every day in his restaurant, training employees and serving customers. Behind the law-abiding and generous citizen, however, hides a ruthless criminal who controls crystal and cocaine distribution in the south-west. Gus works for the Mexican cartel of Don Eladio who had sent Hector Salamanca and his nephew Tuco as the cartel's representatives to New Mexico.

Since Tuco's death, the crystal market is dry, and Walt and Jesse are cooking again in the van. Together with Skinny Pete, Badger and Combo, they are trying to build up a distribution network, but it is too slow and does not bring the revenue Walt was used to when they worked with Tuco. When a kid shoots Combo for selling crystal on the territory that Gus's thugs are controlling, their weak infrastructure is finished: Skinny Pete quits, because he is on probation, and Badger flees to California.

The ever-inventive criminal lawyer and lawyer for criminals Saul Goodman comes up with a plan: «I know a guy who knows a guy.»<sup>28</sup> Through Mike, an ex-cop from Philadelphia, Saul arranges a meeting at the Pollos Hermanos restaurant, and Walt shows up on time. Jesse is late and high on crystal. That is why Gus does not make contact. Walt persists; he goes to the restaurant the next day and waits until closing time. Gus does not admit to anything but gives him a chance via one of his underlings. It is a test: place 38 pounds of crystal at a certain place, where \$1.2 million is waiting for you. Since Jesse's girlfriend Jane got him on heroin and he is spaced out in bed, Walt has to break into Jesse's house, get the crystal from

<sup>28</sup> BB, S2:E11 «Mandala», 34:55.

its hiding place under the kitchen sink, and rush to the meeting point to deposit it. He just makes it there in time and collects the money but misses the birth of his daughter Holly. Lying to his family is now second nature; the lies just seem to form themselves in his mouth.

Anticipation is the means of survival in Albuquerque's criminal underworld: if I identify you as a deadly threat to me, I have to kill you before you kill me. The theory is as simple as that, but the practice is much more complicated: time is of the essence, because I do not know when you are going to strike. First, I have to identify the threat; second, think quickly about how to deal with it while minimizing my own risk; and third, swiftly set my plan in motion. The consequences of a mistakenly identified threat – that is, either I misjudge the potential of danger, or I identify the wrong person as a threat – are, in the worst case, my death, in the best case, the continuation of threats of all against all. I had better get it right and I need to do so in time if I want to stay alive and protect my family and property.

In S2:E12 «Phoenix», we see how Walt uses a situation to his advantage. It is not anticipation, but self-defence. What Walt does to save himself is not murder but failure to provide assistance. Jane is blackmailing Walt; she wants both Jesse's and his cut, otherwise she is going to spill the beans to the newspapers. Her plan is to go abroad with Jesse and the money. Walt goes to Jesse's house and finds the two in bed, again spaced out on heroin. Jane is unconscious and choking on her vomit, and Walt watches her die. Technically, he does not kill her, but he could have saved her by simply turning her on her stomach and getting rid of the vomit. But she is a threat to him, and her death eliminates the threat.

The most impressive acts of anticipation are Walt's elimination of Gale and Gus. This story is probably the most elaborate and complicated part of the plot, superbly written and excellently acted, like the entire series.

To offer Walt, who has stopped cooking, an incentive, Gus has quirky-nerdy Gale Boetticher, a vegan chemist, kit out a

professional laboratory. Gus hires Gale as assistant to Walt, because he does not do business with junkies; they are not reliable. But Walt wants Jesse as his partner, because Jesse just does what he tells him to do. I think that Walt really likes Jesse, like a son. Albeit Gale never gives him a reason to mistrust him, Walt conceives of Gale as a threat, because he is an academically trained chemist, hence a competitor. Even when he admiringly inspects the new lab, Walt is still rejecting Gus's offer for moral reasons. Yet, Gus, who can read people's weaknesses and strengths, knows which button to push: «A man provides».<sup>29</sup> He who stops providing is no man at all; if you are a man, you keep providing, regardless of your feelings or moral considerations. The offer of three months cooking for \$3 million does the rest. Gus extends his offer to \$15 million annually, contract open ended.<sup>30</sup> The lab is located under a laundry Gus owns; the people working there are illegal immigrants, hence used to seeing nothing, hearing nothing and saying nothing.

Walt's feeling of being threatened by Gus begins when the Mexican cartel, headed by Don Eladio, starts to put Gus under pressure in S3:E13 «Full Measure». Jesse wants to kill Gus's thugs who had ordered the kid to shoot Combo; Walt interrupts Jesse's plan and kills them for him by driving into them and shooting the one who has not yet died. Mike witnesses it and cleans up the mess, then he reports to Gus. Gale is back as Walt's assistant in the lab, since Jesse is in hiding and smoking crystal. A new thug called Victor is monitoring Walt and Gale's every move in the lab. When the Mexican cartel probes for Gus's weakness by stealing chemicals from one of his factories, Gus has to react.

Walt knows nothing about the cartel's threat to Gus. Victor monitoring them every second convinces him that Gus does not trust him; he suspects that once Gale has learned how to cook his blue, he will be obsolete. He anticipates Gus's next move and asks Jesse, who is still in town, for Gale's address. If Gale is gone, Gus will need Walt and Jesse to cook. Walt is on his way to Gale's

<sup>29</sup> BB, S3:E5 «Mas», 21:18

<sup>30</sup> BB, S3:E9 «Kafkaesque».



apartment to kill him, but is hindered by Victor, who is following him everywhere. Walt calls Jesse; Jesse shoots Gale because he is convinced of Mr White's logical arguments. Harmless Gale had given Walt a copy of Walt Whitman's poetry with a personal dedication to W.W. in his handwriting, which will later set Hank on to Walt.<sup>31</sup>

In S4:E1 «Box Cutter», we see Walt and Jesse being brought down to the subterranean lab. Everybody – Victor, Mike, Walt and Jesse – is convinced that Gus is going to kill the two cooks to punish them for disrespecting his wishes. From Gus's viewpoint, Jesse had made peace with the two thugs who had had the kid kill Combo.<sup>32</sup> By planning to kill them anyway, Jesse has broken his promise to Gus and the peace in Gus's organisation. Walt needs to be punished for helping Jesse kill the two thugs, and both have to die for killing innocent Gale, a valuable business asset in Gus's organization.

What happens then is a masterpiece of screenwriting: Gus, calm and collected as ever, comes down into the lab, takes off his clothes and dresses in lab gear. He does not say a word. This makes Walt so anxious that he is talking for his and Jesse's lives. His arguments are perfectly rational, appealing to Gus's sense of business: if Gus kills them now, he will not only lose millions of dollars in revenue, but also end his monopoly on crystal production in New Mexico. Who can cook blue? Only he and Jesse. It will take Gus years to find new cooks as capable as them. The question is now, if Gus really wants to renounce on all the revenue, he and Jesse can make for him.

While Walt is talking for their lives, we see Gus going through cupboards and drawers in the lab, searching for something. He finds a box cutter and approaches them face on. He is standing at Victor's right, facing Walt, Jesse and Mike, who is guarding them from the rear. All of a sudden, Gus turns towards Victor and cuts his throat with the box cutter. Mike's face shows how shocked he is by this unexpected move. Gus's eyes are somewhat moist while he is holding Victor's head to the left, making sure that he is bleeding to death as quickly as possible. Why did Victor have to die?

<sup>31</sup> BB, S5:E9 «Blood Money».

<sup>32</sup> BB, S3:E12 «Half Measures».

Gus has changed his mind on the spot because of Walt's convincing arguments. Letting go of millions of dollars of revenue and shutting down an entire branch of his business just for punishment or the feeling of disrespect? No. Killing his cooks would also expose him to the cartel, weakening his basis for negotiation and eliminating his potential independence from the cartel. Gus is too rational to act impulsively, but somebody has to die, to put the balance right. In Gus's rational way of thinking, Victor deserves to die because he did not prevent the murder of Gale.

Walt and Jesse, who is off the crystal, are cooking for Gus, monitored by a different thug. Having seen that Gus is capable of killing a man with his own hands convinces Walt that Gus has just postponed their liquidation. He buys weapons from a black-market dealer.<sup>33</sup> In S4:E6 «Cornered», Skyler asks Walt to admit that he is in danger. Walt answers that nobody will come knocking at their door and threaten him. His reply has become iconic in pop culture: «I am the danger. I am the one who knocks!»<sup>34</sup> Walt suspects that Gus is driving a wedge between him and Jesse, when he learns that Mike and Jesse are running errands for Gus. He is also jealous, since he thinks that Jesse is becoming Gus's protégé. If Gus is turning Jesse against him, Walt has to anticipate Gus and Jesse's next moves.

Unbeknownst to Walt, Gus offers the Mexican cartel a one-time down-payment of \$50 million for severing ties for good.<sup>35</sup> The cartel replies by sending a sniper, who shoots one of Gus's employees, a provocation that cannot be left unanswered. In S4:E8 «Hermanos», we learn about Gus's past with the cartel. A young Gus in his late twenties and his boyfriend and business partner Max Arciniega,<sup>36</sup> a

<sup>33</sup> BB, S4:E2 «Thirty-Eight Snub».

<sup>34</sup> BB, S4:E6 «Cornered», 37:38, 37:33.

<sup>35</sup> BB, S4:E7 «Problem Dog».

<sup>36</sup> Gus does not have a family. He does not even order male hookers. After Max's death, Gus lives without love and friendship, completely focussed on his business as a basis for his revenge. Later in S5:E1, «Live Free or Die», the DEA finds a list of Gus's secret bank accounts on the Cayman Islands hidden behind a picture of him and Max. This is psychological evidence that Max and Gus had been lovers.

university-trained chemist, had made Don Eladio a proposal to cook crystal, a new venue for the cartel's business portfolio, hitherto focussed on cocaine. Don Eladio, probably just because it was Thursday afternoon, had Hector shoot Max and left Gus alive to take care of the cartel's business in the USA; Gus emigrated to New Mexico and opened his restaurant chain Pollos Hermanos as a smoke screen for the distribution of the cartel's drugs.

Revenge is a dish best served cold. Gus hatches a cunning plan: to get rid of the cartel's top bosses, he needs Jesse to teach the cartel's chemists how to cook blue. This generous offer will convince the cartel that his loyalty to Don Eladio is firm, that Gus knows his place. Walt interprets Jesse's trip to Mexico as a further alienation, misjudging the situation. In S4:E10 «Salud», Gus, Mike and Jesse fly to Mexico. Jesse instructs the cartel's chemists; after the cooking, everybody meets at the swimming pool in Don Eladio's villa. Gus has brought a special present, a bottle of very expensive liquor. All cartel bosses have a drink, and while Gus is in the bathroom, vomiting his poisoned drink, they die. The cartel wiped from the face of the earth, Mike, Gus and Jesse make it back to Albuquerque.

Walt still fears that Gus is going to kill him. Gus threatens him in the desert: either leave Jesse alone or he is going to kill Walt's family.<sup>37</sup> Walt desperately tries to get Jesse back by convincing him that Gus has had Andrea's little boy Brock poisoned with Rycin.<sup>38</sup> Walt tells Jesse that Gus did this to convince Jesse that Walt has poisoned the little boy, that Mr White is a monster. Poisoning little Brock with the harmless Lily of The Valley is Walt's move to make Jesse come back and go against Gus with him. It works. Jesse returns to him, Brock survives, and Walt builds a bomb.

In S4:E13 «Face Off», Walt finally kills Gus, removing the main threat to his life. I think that Thomas Hobbes would have complimented Walt on his plan, because it is a superb demonstration of effective anticipation and cooperation in a state of war. Walt must kill Gus before Gus kills him, and Hector wants Gus dead as revenge

<sup>37</sup> BB, S4:E11 «Crawl Space».

<sup>38</sup> BB, S4:E12 «End Times».

for killing the cartel's bosses and the entire Salamanca family, the sociopathic killer-cousins in the silk suits and ridiculous boots included. How can Walt get at Gus, and quickly? If I cannot get to you, I have to make you come to me.

Saul tells Walt about Hector, who lives in Casa Tranquila, a home for the elderly. Walt visits Hector, who communicates with his bell and an alphabetical chart; Hector then instructs his nurse to call the DEA. He wants to talk to Hank only. The meeting takes place at the DEA HQ in downtown Albuquerque, naturally monitored by one of Gus's thugs. Hector has nothing else to say to the DEA agents than a very vulgar expression that begins with s and ends with k, but the point is that Gus's thug has seen Hector being driven to the DEA building and back home to Casa Tranquila. Since Gus must stop Hector talking to the DEA to protect his business, he visits him and walks right into Walt's trap. Gus has a syringe prepared to poison Hector. The time of his revenge for Max's death has come. In his many visits to Hector, Gus has always insisted that Hector should look at him, acknowledging him as an equal. Hector looks at Gus and grins. Gus's reputation with the DEA is flawless, but even with the cartel gone, Hector is still a threat to him, because he knows too much. Gus's plan to kill Hector is thus also an act of anticipation and he dies through Walt's act of anticipation. Hector activates the bomb Walt has placed under his wheelchair with the little bell and – boom! When Gus steps out of Hector's room, we see that half of his face is off, much like the robot in *Terminator*.

### 3. Aspects of Hannah Arendt's political theory in BB

#### 3.1 Power, Strength, Authority and Violence

Hannah Arendt distinguishes between power, strength, authority and violence:

*Power* corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is «in power» we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name.<sup>39</sup>

*Strength* unequivocally designates something in the singular, an individual entity; it is the property inherent in an object or person and belongs to its character, which may prove itself in relation to other things or persons, but is essentially independent of them. The strength of even the strongest individual can always be overpowered by the many [...]<sup>40</sup>

*Authority* [...] can be vested in persons [...] or it can be vested in offices, as, for instance, in the Roman senate (*auctoritas in senatu*) or in the hierarchical offices of the Church [...] Its hallmark is unquestioning recognition by those who are asked to obey; neither coercion nor persuasion is needed. [...] To remain in authority requires respect for the person or the office. The greatest enemy of authority, therefore, is contempt, and the surest way to undermine it is laughter.<sup>41</sup>

*Violence*, finally [...] is distinguished by its instrumental character. Phenomenologically, it is close to strength, since the implements of violence, like all other tools, are designed and used for the purpose of multiplying natural strength [...]<sup>42</sup>

Arendt's precise definitions are based on her superb knowledge of antique Greek, Latin and modern political theory; let us apply them to BB. First, it is mistaken to say that the cartel is in power or

<sup>39</sup> H. Arendt: *On Violence*, 44. Empowering somebody to act on my behalf is based on the principal element of rational choice: I rationally choose the person most suitable to represent me, that is, my interests as a citizen.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

powerful. The institutions of power are those governing the city of Albuquerque, the state of New Mexico and the USA, since citizens have empowered the representatives to act on their behalf by electing them. Neither Gus's organization nor the cartel, albeit they are large groups, hold power, because their members have not been elected by criminals to rule the underworld. Gus and the cartel have established their strong positions simply with violence and money. The cartel does business by the means of brutally applied violence and a rigid chain of command. None of the bosses holds authority, because the obedience of their thugs is based on fear, not respect. Between themselves, the bosses get along with each other as long as the cooperation remains financially beneficial to all, but if one misbehaves, he is a threat to the others, and they to him. Their appreciation of each other has nothing to do with respect, they tolerate each other for the sake of business. Is it not interesting that in many movies the biggest criminals, mafia bosses and drug crooks always demand respect and refer to themselves with aristocratic titles such as Don Corleone and Don Eladio? I think that, deep down in their hearts and minds, they know that even equipped with lots of money and arsenals of weapons they are just criminal lowlife, unworthy of true respect.

Gus holds authority over his employees at Pollos Hermanos, who respect him as a hard-working boss, but not over the thugs in his drug business. Gus's strength is on a very high level; he commands hundreds of employees, be it at his seven Pollos Hermanos restaurants or in the shadier parts of his business. His strength allows him to enjoy a certain independence, and once he has poisoned the cartel's bosses, his strength and independence increase. But as strong as he is, he dies at the hands of the incapacitated Hector and Walt who cooperate to kill him.

Walt's strength is growing in S2:E10 «Over». We see the family and friends in the Whites' house at a party organized to celebrate Walt's successful chemotherapy. Hank cannot take the chatter of the ladies any longer and asks Walt for something stronger than beer. They sit beside the swimming pool and drink whisky. Walt allows

Flynn to have a drink with them, which Flynn enjoys. What teenager would not? Walt is jealous of Hank, because Flynn is talking to his uncle. Walt gives his son another drink, then a third. Hank tells Walt to stop and takes the bottle away, while Flynn is sick in the pool. Walt is very angry, his authority over his son threatened by Hank. He tells Hank to bring the bottle back: «My son, my bottle, my house.»<sup>43</sup> Walt's ego tolerates no opposition. His fierceness astonishes Hank, who gives the bottle back. As a father, Walt loses his authority over Flynn, when his son learns that he had Hank killed. Flynn does not believe that Walt had tried to stop Uncle Jack and the gang. At the end of the series, Flynn is full of contempt for his once beloved father, and Walt's authority as a parent is gone.

Walt's strength peaks with Gus's death. But he faces another threat from the nine criminals who are in prison. They are Mike's boys and can tell the APD and DEA about Gus's drug operations and Walt's cooking. In S5:E8 «Gliding over All», Walt hires Uncle Jack and his gang to kill the nine prisoners. The operation is complicated since Walt wants all nine guys, who are in three different prisons, dead within two minutes. Uncle Jack's connections and Walt's payment seal the fate of Mike's boys.

When is Walt at his weakest? I think it's in the pilot, when the rich kid takes a picture of him, while he is polishing his car. In that moment, the kid undermines Walt's authority as his teacher by mocking him. Walt's weakness turns into growing strength when he observes Jesse flee the house. That is the moment when Walt decides to cook. Jesse never questions Walt's authority; he addresses him respectfully as Mr White until the end, even when he warns Hank and Gomi not to underestimate him, telling them that Mr White is the devil.

Hank is empowered by the people since he serves with the DEA; he is thus a powerful member of the community he defends against the criminals. He also has authority over his DEA team; he is respected and enjoys promotion to ASAC, Assistant Special Agent

<sup>43</sup> BB, S2:E10 «Over», 32:48.

in Charge.<sup>44</sup> The DEA agents under his command never lose their respect for him. Marie loves and respects him.

In BB, violence comes in two forms: the DEA and APD use positive violence to uphold the law and protect the citizens from the criminal gangs. The cartel and Gus's organization use negative violence as punishment and to protect their business. Walt uses negative violence to protect his family and the revenue from his blue, but, if asked, he would insist that his violence is positive, ignoring the fact that it was his decisions that put the family in danger in the first place.

### 3.2 Judgement

Arendt on judgement:

There are a number of reasons why the discussion of the right or the ability to judge touches on the most important moral issue. Two things are involved here: First, how can I tell right from wrong, if the majority or my whole environment has prejudged the issue? Who am I to judge? And second, to what extent, if at all, can we judge past events or occurrences at which we were not present? As to the latter, it seems glaringly obvious that no historiography and no courtroom procedure would be possible at all if we denied ourselves this capability. [...] The moment moral issues are raised, even in passing, he who raises them will be confronted with this frightful lack of self-confidence and hence of pride, and also with a kind of mock-modesty that in saying, Who am I to judge? actually means We're all alike, equally bad, and those who try, or pretend that they try, to remain halfway decent are either saints or hypocrites, and in either case should leave us alone.<sup>45</sup>

Arendt's explanation of judgement applies also to judgements that we make in the present; my judging a situation prompts me to decide how to act, to make a decision. Judgement is thus the basis of decision-making. I can judge only if I am capable of and willing to distinguish morally good from morally bad actions, not only the

<sup>44</sup> [https://breakingbad.fandom.com/wiki/Hank\\_Schrader](https://breakingbad.fandom.com/wiki/Hank_Schrader); accessed 27 February 2021.

<sup>45</sup> H. Arendt: Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship, 19.



actions of others, but also my own. Let me now apply Arendt's explanation to some of BB's characters in three ways: first, morally good judgement, second, mixed judgement, and third, morally bad judgement or misjudgement.

Good judgement: The only character in BB who consistently makes good judgements is Hank, because he cannot be corrupted. Hank always plays by the rules and sticks to the law. Knowing that he needs evidence to get at Walt with the power and authority of the law, he convinces Jesse to help him provoke Walt into telling him where he has hidden his money.<sup>46</sup> The money is the evidence Hank needs. Apart from his upright character and rational and ethical way of thinking and judging, Hank also has a good instinct, a gut feeling for how criminals behave. By comparing Gale's handwriting in his lab notes with the handwriting in the dedication to W.W., Hank understands that W.W. means Walter White and not the poet Walt Whitman; he then swiftly puts his plan into motion. It works; with a faked picture made by Hank, Jesse convinces Walt that he has found his barrels of money in the desert and is burning it.<sup>47</sup> Walt arrives to save his money, and Hank and Gomi arrest him. The last phone call Hank makes is to Marie to tell her that they have arrested Walt.

Mixed judgement: When Marie learns the truth about Walt being Heisenberg from Hank and about Skyler's refusal to support Hank in building the case with her confession, she makes a good judgement of the situation at the White's house: she wants to take the children to her home, protecting them from a criminal environment.<sup>48</sup> Skyler and Walt are criminals; Walt cooks blue, and Skyler launders his money. Yet, Marie's good judgement goes against the law; Hank knows that and convinces her that she has to leave the children with the parents. Otherwise, Marie makes bad judgements when she is shoplifting and showing up at houses on the market, pretending to be interested in buying. She knows that stealing is a

<sup>46</sup> BB, S5:E10 «Buried».

<sup>47</sup> BB, S5:E13 «To 'hajlee».

<sup>48</sup> BB, S5:E10 «Buried».

criminal offence but enjoys the thrill that comes with it, much like Walt, whose cooking makes him feel alive. I think Marie visits houses on the market because of a psychological need; she is in dire need of attention. Skyler makes one good judgement: when she asks Elliott and Gretchen Schwartz to help finance Walt's cancer therapy, she does not know yet about his cooking. Yet, once she knows the truth, she not only plays along, overwhelmed by the money Walt makes, but comes up with a plan how to launder it: she convinces Bogdan with a little scheme to sell her the car wash. Marie and Skyler are morally flawed, the former by her shoplifting issues, the latter by her collaboration in laundering Walt's money.

Bad judgement or misjudgement: Lydia is a criminal mastermind in her own right and consistent in her bad moral judgement. She not only wants Mike's nine guys killed before Walt sets his mind to it but sets up Declan's gang to be killed by Uncle Jack and his gang in S5:E10 «Buried». Lydia is so ice-cold that she impresses even Todd, who fancies her. She dies a well-deserved slow death at Walt's hands. In S5:E16 «Felina», Walt meets her and Todd in the coffee shop and begs them to consider taking up business with him again. What for? Revenge. Lydia and Todd decline Walt's offer and do not notice that Walt has laced Lydia's sugar substitute with Rycin. When she, visibly ill, calls Todd, he cannot pick up the phone, because Jesse has just strangled him. Walt picks up Todd's phone and tells her that she is going to die from Rycin poisoning.

Walt's ego makes him misjudge Todd. Seemingly harmless young Todd is as ice-cold as Lydia. He is always very polite and seems to admire Walt, playing to his vanity and manipulating him into hiring Uncle Jack and his gang. It is a crude mistake by Walt, Mike and Jesse not to eliminate Todd after he has shot the kid on the bike in the desert. Todd's murder of the boy on the bike haunts Jesse, who has a soft spot for kids.

Finally, what are the two worst misjudgements in BB? First, it is Walt's refusal of Elliot's offer to come back to Grey Matter.<sup>49</sup> This

<sup>49</sup> BB, S1:E5 «Grey Matter».

is a misjudgement of epic proportions. Had Walt taken up that offer, he could have made a lot of money, bought back some Grey Matter shares, provided for his family, enjoyed the freedom of research and possibly won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry. But his ego makes him decline Elliot's well-meant offer. Elliot's offer is not charity, but a business proposal born from friendship and respect, yet Walt does not see it that way. Second, the DVD Walt and Skyler make in S5:E11 «Confession» is a major misjudgement, because Walt thinks that the DVD will stop Hank from going after him. The very idea of turning the truth around is brilliant: we see Walt looking into the camera and saying that when you watch this DVD, I am probably dead. Then he tells his story: his brother-in-law Hank Schrader is Heisenberg, the drug kingpin in Albuquerque, who is hiding in plain sight in his function as DEA officer. Hank has been cooperating with Gustavo Fring who has threatened Walt's family. Hank has killed Fring and is now blackmailing Walt to keep cooking crystal. In the DVD, Walt presents himself as the victim of Hank. But why does he think that this DVD could possibly stop Hank from going after him? Walt, who really should know Hank, misjudges his brother-in-law's perseverance. He should have known that Hank will find a way to arrest him on the basis of evidence.

## Conclusion

Let me now answer my research questions: First, why is the global public still so smitten with Walter White? Second, what can one learn from BB for our contemporary *conditio humana* in the 21st century? Third, is Walter White the master of his life, thus self-determined (*Selbstbestimmung*), or is he dominated by forces outside of his own free will (*Fremdbestimmung*)?

First: there are dramas that are so compelling that one cannot forget them, not because they tell a new story, but because they tell an old story in a new way. BB is a new interpretation of the biblical character change from Saulus to Paulus, turned on its head. Walt

turns from Paulus to Saulus. He appeals to us because he is human. A decent man turns into a bad man, and we witness his descent into evil. We can understand why he is breaking bad: acting decently and always doing the right thing got him nowhere, on the contrary. Fate has dealt Walt a very bad card, and when he is diagnosed with terminal lung cancer, he decides to cook crystal: the money he earns will provide his wife and children with financial security.

Second: we can learn from Walt what not to do. If you choose the wrong path, you will have to deal with the consequences of your choices. This statement does not make our *conditio humana* in the 21st century any easier, but it promotes a clear message: you alone are responsible for your deeds, nobody else. If you think it is a good idea to cook crystal, you will end up like Walt: alone and lonely, hated by your family. If you decide to start smoking crystal, you will end up like the Albuquerque junkies, prostituting yourself for the next smoke. And if you think you have it in you to take it up with a drug cartel, there is always another person endowed with more criminal energy and equipped with better weapons than you.

Third: is Walt an independent actor, does he make his decisions of his own free will? Yes, absolutely. Nobody forced Walt to start cooking crystal. At the beginning of his criminal career, Walt's intentions seem to be moral; he wants to provide for his family. Knowing that he has only two years left to live, Walt turns, in financial terms, from a decent loser into a criminal provider, alienating the very persons he apparently cares so much for.

Who is BB's epitome of evil? I think it is Uncle Jack and his idiotic gang of white supremacists, his nephew Todd and greedy, ruthless Lydia, who drinks camomile tea, has a little daughter and no problem at all about having people killed. Mike is the only one who sees right through her. Lydia's criminal energy knows no bounds, and she can always talk herself out of a threat, for example, when she suggests to Mike, Walt and Jesse to steal the methylamine they are short of from a train she dispatches every month. To Lydia, Todd, Uncle Jack and his gang, human life is just a factor, a figure and more often than not a simple nuisance. If somebody gets in their way, they just

do away with them. So malignant are the activities of these characters that one would find it difficult to argue against the death penalty, were they on trial.

Who is the kindest and most altruistic character in BB? To me, there are two: Jesse and Hank.

Jesse is a young man, a graduate from high school, who has chosen the path of making easy money by cooking crystal. He also smokes it without a care in the world. He is only interested in having a good time. Jesse is not innocent; he has killed Gale and Todd, the former because Mr White told him to do it and the latter out of revenge for having held him in a dungeon. Jesse has a tender heart, especially for young women and children. Confronted with all the evil in the criminal underworld, Jesse is changing into a softer, kinder and morally better character; he is growing up. Jesse is turning from an immature little Saulus into a grown-up Paulus, hence the opposite of Mr White. He is very kind to the little boy, neglected by his junkie-parents who steal the ATM; he also pays for Andrea and Brock's move into a better neighbourhood. Jesse's main flaw is his feeling of being lonely, his need for company. He also displays a serious lack of thinking straight, although he is not stupid at all. Jesse has his moment of intellectual brilliance, when he suggests replacing the methylamine from the train with water so nobody would notice that the drug has been stolen.<sup>50</sup> Jesse deserves a second chance; in *El Camino*, he escapes to Alaska<sup>51</sup> with the help of Ed, the

<sup>50</sup> BB, S5:E5 «Dead Freight».

<sup>51</sup> Why does Jesse escape to Alaska? What does Alaska mean to the American mind, what place does it have in American culture? My friend Daniel E. Miller: «For most of us, Alaska is romanticized. It is cold, people hunt, there is commercial fishing, dog sleds deliver the mail, and there is plenty of oil. Those are the jobs we know exist, but we also know that Alaska is relatively poor. We also know that there is little in the north, with most of the cities in the center or along the southern coast.» Michelle Hale: «I live in Juneau, in the Southeast part of the state, [...] To me, living in Alaska requires a certain ability to put up with things. Juneau is an incredibly beautiful place, for example, with abundant hiking opportunities, fishing,

«disappearer», after having killed the boss of the gang who made the chains that kept him in Uncle Jack's lab.

Hank is the American hero: faithful to his wife, disciplined, never giving up and suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder after having witnessed the turtle bombing in El Paso, Texas. After the shoot-out with the Salamanca killer-cousins, Hank recovers and undergoes months of physical therapy to be able to walk again. He takes a fancy to collecting minerals; Marie calls them rocks, and she

camping, skiing; really great outdoor opportunities. But we have truly awful weather and in the winter it is often dark and wet for many months. Our latitude is 58 degrees. And you can't drive out of Juneau so it can be pretty isolating. A lot of people say it is «toughness» that is required and I suppose that is one way to put it. I rather think it is just the ability to put up with things. My family all live in Alaska and this is different than most Alaskans. In the 1970's and 1980's we experienced a population boom as the pipeline was built from the North Slope to Valdez, and most people in the state are from elsewhere. There is a strong streak of independence but a huge reliance upon federal funding, which a lot of people refuse to acknowledge. My family came in the 1910's on my mother's side, from Norway; and in the 1920's on my father's side. They were in fishing and farming and mining. Alaska means tolerating a lot of inconvenience in order to live in a beautiful place where wildness still exists. It was easier a few decades ago for people with criminal backgrounds to disappear in Alaska than it is now. Lots of people did that. With the internet, it is not so easy now. But I think that idea remains ... have you read *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer? And it is a strange situation, theoretically it is not for the weak and whiny, but there is huge entitlement here and that actually gets pretty whiny. For example, the state pays a dividend to residents from earnings from past oil revenue. It has become such an entitlement that many people think their annual check is more important than pretty much any state services. Alaska has not been immune to the far-right extremes in the US, either. It's ugly and scary right now. Covid has made those extreme differences leap to the forefront. I was born in Juneau but lived in what we call «the bush» – on a remote island – when I was a teenager. That disabused me of a lot of the romance of living in the wild. Yes, people help each other, absolutely, in life-threatening situations, but they also get drunk and shoot each other. Alaska has an incredibly high rate of sexual abuse, alcoholism, and domestic violence. Probably Siberia does, too.» Email conversation with Dan Miller and Michelle Hale from 16 to 25 March 2021.

is spot on, without knowing it. Collecting rocks is Hank's way of finding new ground, a solid basis for his future actions. Once Hank makes the connection that Walt is the infamous Heisenberg, he relentlessly pursues his brother-in-law. Hank dies in dignity and authority; he does not beg for his life: «I am ASAC Schrader, and you can go f... yourself!»<sup>52</sup> he says to Uncle Jack before he is shot.

Finally, is BB anti-feminist or anti-women? No, the series is just not about women. BB tells the story of a man's descent into evil, how he changes from a decent Paulus into an evil Saulus. BB is art, fiction, and the story of polite but not truly kind Walt is one of the best dramas I have ever seen. BB questions our understanding of masculinity: what does it mean to be a man?

At a time when self-appointed apostles of social justice are shouting anybody down who do not share their cult's beliefs, Western civilization should remember what made it a civilization: science, tolerance and law. BB is so successful because it is authentic and truthful, without preaching. BB simply shows us that the judgements and decisions we make, the paths we choose, will prompt consequences that affect not only us, but also those close to us.

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<sup>52</sup> BB, S5:E14 «Ozymandias», 37:35