

Extended Essay

How does the television drama *Breaking Bad* conform to or deviate from the conventions of the 16th century morality play?

Candidate Number:

Exam Session: May 2015

Group 1, Category 3: Studies in Language

Advisor:

Word Count: 3794

Abstract

This extended essay is intended to answer the research question: “How does the television drama *Breaking Bad* conform to or deviate from the conventions of the 16th century morality play?” I evaluated similarities and differences between the television drama *Breaking Bad* and morality plays of the 16th century. I found that both have strong religious implications, though in morality plays, these implications were far more explicit. The vernacular dramas were written and performed so as to encourage audiences to live a more Christian lifestyle, and thus include characters that are personifications of moral values. They deliver an overarching lesson, and refer to some sort of god and/or life after death. In *Breaking Bad*, characters can be interpreted to represent some values in the style of the morality play, and these characters live in a similarly moral universe. However, the program is characterized by a depiction of evil rather than a depiction of good, and its protagonist, Walter White, does not share the Christian faith in an afterlife. Through analysis of the entire series, interviews with writers, producers, and directors, collections of morality plays, and text about what is commonly known as the Third Golden Age of Television, the essay acknowledges that *Breaking Bad* is less of an interpretation of the morality play than it is a new format entirely, encompassing characteristics of those plays as well as the morally ambiguous storytelling that has characterized this golden age.

Table of Contents

I. Introduction.....	4
II. Background of the Morality Play	6
III. <i>Breaking Bad</i> and the Golden Age of Television	8
IV. Cultural Context.....	10
V. Similarities.....	11
VI. Differences	19
VII. Conclusion	23
Works Cited.....	24

I. Introduction

In the pilot episode of the American television drama *Breaking Bad*, protagonist Walter White delivers a lecture to his high school chemistry students. He remarks that while chemistry is widely regarded as the study of matter, he prefers to see it as the study of change: “It is growth, then decay, then transformation.”¹ The narrative that follows is clearly in alignment with this premise quotation. Over the course of five seasons, Walter is transformed from a mild-mannered husband and father into the drug kingpin Heisenberg, becoming depraved to the point that he revels in his criminal notoriety.

Creator and executive producer Vince Gilligan’s goal with *Breaking Bad* is clear: “to turn Mr. Chips into Scarface.”² This is a reference to James Hilton’s beloved schoolteacher and Brian De Palma’s Cuban mobster, respectively. Walter’s decision to “cook” methamphetamine leads to tremendous carnage, not only within his family but also within society at large.

At first glance, *Breaking Bad* does not bear much resemblance to the morality play, a form of vernacular drama from the 16th century. While also intended to entertain, the morality play’s primary purpose was to encourage its audiences to live virtuous, Catholic lives by demonstrating the importance of good deeds. *Breaking Bad*, littered with evil deeds, makes no such attempt to influence its audiences. In fact, it shows a journey from good to evil.

Upon closer examination, however, the program does evoke many of the classic conventions of the morality play. Both *Breaking Bad* and the morality play revolve

¹ “Pilot.” *Breaking Bad*. American Movie Classics. AMC, New York City. 20 Jan. 2008. Television.

² Gilligan, Vince. “‘Breaking Bad’: Vince Gilligan on Meth and Morals.” Fresh Air. By Terry Gross. National Public Radio. WHYY, Philadelphia. 19 Sep. 2011. Radio.

around the actions of an everyman character who has the opportunity to demonstrate moral agency. Both depict crime and punishment and assign key virtues to specific characters.

The two texts are different in their treatment of religious themes, such as the afterlife – the morality play was predicated on such Catholic beliefs, whereas Walter lacks any religious conviction. They are also different in the choices made by their central characters. The medieval protagonists generally strived to make righteous choices, while Walter finds fulfillment in his reprehensible choices. These differences are driven by the cultural contexts of medieval Europe and modern-day America - one religious, the other secular.

II. Background of the Morality Play

In the 1500s, bands of players performed quasi-religious plays supported by public donations.³ Evangelism was a fundamental ingredient of these vernacular dramas. The primary intention was to encourage the audience to live prosperous, Catholic lives. *The Somonyng of Everyman* (henceforth *The Summoning of Everyman*) is commonly cited as the archetypal morality play. The character Everyman is called upon by Death to meet his reckoning:

*“For ye shall hear, how our heaven king
Calleth Everyman to a general reckoning...”*⁴

He is allowed one comrade to speak for his good virtues.⁵ Everyman begins his pilgrimage to find a friend that will accompany him to meet Death, but the other characters – who have representative names such as Fellowship (friends) and Goods (material possessions) – are unwilling to do so. Only Good Deeds agrees, though she initially laments that she is too weak to do so.⁶

The significance is clear – one can only enter the afterlife with his good deeds. When he makes his reckoning before God, Everyman realizes that he has lived a selfish life. He punishes himself with a scourge to properly repent.⁷ It is important to identify some relevant features of the morality play. Firstly, as mentioned above, characters represent moral attributes, values or entities (and are often named accordingly). Secondly, these characters generally provide the protagonist with some sort of religious guidance.

³ “Morality Play (dramatic genre).” *Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica, 16 Jan. 2014. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.

⁴ Appelbaum, Stanley, and Ward, Candice, eds. *Everyman and Other Miracle & Morality Plays*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995. Print.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Thirdly, the protagonist tends to be an individual with unremarkable power or knowledge, and/or an individual who represents humanity as a whole. “Everyman” has since become a literary term used to refer to characters with whom the audience can easily identify. It is perhaps the most prevalent characteristic of the morality play that survives today, surfacing in literature, poetry, film, and television.

III. *Breaking Bad* and the Golden Age of television

Despite its dramatic roots, television appears to be one of the most maligned mediums in the history of storytelling. The opinion of Philip Mudd, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency's Counterterrorist Center, has been widely echoed by television detractors. In an interview on *The Colbert Report*, Mudd commented, "We got great books, we got great people, we got great cafes... About 18 down that list for me is TV, which turns your brain into cotton candy."⁸ This view fails to reflect the ways in which television has changed in recent years. As writer Lisa Schwarzbaum observes in *The New York Times*, the time "when the phrases 'boob tube,' 'idiot box,' and 'vast wasteland' went unchallenged as television descriptors" has passed.⁹ With notable cable dramas such as *Mad Men*, *The Wire*, *True Detective*, and *The Sopranos* growing in popularity and critical acclaim, the best of television has begun to embrace complicated and multifaceted narratives. In *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution*, author Brett Martin terms this burgeoning era "the third golden age of television," after telecasts in the 1950s soon after the creation of television, and telecasts in the 1980s that introduced the network drama.¹⁰

Breaking Bad epitomizes this golden age, belonging to a group of programs that critics have lauded as pioneers in dark and complex storytelling. Such narratives challenge television's status as little more than an unhealthy, vacuous habit. It is, in fact, an extension of drama, and an art form that is essential to American culture. Accordingly,

⁸ Mudd, Philip. Interviewed by Stephen Colbert. *The Colbert Report*. 12 Sep. 2014. Television.

⁹ Schwarzbaum, Lisa. "No More Mr. Nice Guys." *The New York Times* 14 Jul. 2013: BR12. Print.

¹⁰ Martin, Brett. *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution*. New York: Penguin Group, 2013. Print.

Breaking Bad's storytelling revolves around an anti-hero and is filled with moral ambiguity - Some of Walter's more despicable deeds include bombing a nursing home,¹¹ colluding in the murder of a child,¹² poisoning another child to manipulate his accomplice,¹³ and having a hand in his brother-in-law's execution.¹⁴ The program was a two-time recipient of the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Drama Series and a four-time recipient of the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Drama Series. *Breaking Bad* was a cultural phenomenon – its viewership reached 10.3 million at the series finale.¹⁵

¹¹ "Face Off." *Breaking Bad*. American Movie Classics. AMC, New York City. 9 Oct. 2011. Television.

¹² "Dead Freight." *Breaking Bad*. American Movie Classics. AMC, New York City. 12 Aug. 2012. Television.

¹³ "End Times." *Breaking Bad*. American Movie Classics. AMC, New York City, 2 Oct. 2011. Television.

¹⁴ "Ozymandias." *Breaking Bad*. American Movie Classics. AMC, New York City, 15 Sep. 2013. Television.

¹⁵ "'*Breaking Bad*' smashes ratings records with 10.3 viewers series finale 'Felina'." *International Business Times*. IBT Media Inc., 30 Sep. 2013. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.

IV. Cultural Context

Both morality plays and *Breaking Bad* are a product of their times. The cultural context of the former becomes obvious through its highly religious content. This is because the authority of the Catholic Church in medieval Europe, where miracle plays, mystery plays, and morality plays originated, was nearly absolute. The church was a temporal as well as a spiritual power. Author Peter Watson writes that Michel de Montaigne, a prominent writer from the 16th century Renaissance, “never really doubted that there was a God because to do so in his lifetime was next to impossible.”¹⁶ For many, belief in God was a given.

Breaking Bad and its companions in the third golden age of television exist without such unifying societal norms. The separation of church and state in America is enforced by law, and much of the entertainment industry ignores religion. The post-industrial sentiment of Frederick Nietzsche that “God is dead” is reflected in modern American society, which is overwhelmingly secular.¹⁷

Americans’ cultural emphasis on individuality and movements such as the rallying call to “Question Authority,” following the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War in the 1960s, have laid the groundwork for the rise of the antihero as a popular artistic convention. H. Eric Bender, M.D., mentioned in *Psychology Today* that antiheroes “are who they are and do as they want – without apology.”¹⁸ This is in stark contrast with the medieval emphasis on obedience, specifically to one’s God.

¹⁶ Watson, Peter. *Ideas: A History of Thought and Invention, from Fire to Freud*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2006. Print.

¹⁷ “America is Turning Secular Much Faster Than we Realise.” *The Telegraph*. Telegraph Media Group Limited, 20 Feb. 2014. Web.

¹⁸ Bender, H. Eric. “Rise of the Antihero.” *Psychology Today: Broadcast Thought*. Sussex Publishers, LLC, 29 Sep. 2013. Web. 26 October 2014.

V. Similarities

At the inception of *Breaking Bad*, Walter is clearly intended to be an everyman character. Indeed, he has a superior knowledge of chemistry that some consider to be his “superpower”; but for all intents and purposes, he is ordinary, making him congenial and sympathetic. In season one, he is a lower middle class high school teacher, and his wife Skyler is unexpectedly pregnant with a second child. His family’s financial struggle represents the troubles of a significant demographic of Americans.

Martin mentions in *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution* that *Breaking Bad* writer Thomas Schnauz, lamenting the state of his and Gilligan’s film careers, once jokingly suggested that the two “buy an RV and put a meth lab in the back.” Gilligan reports that at that moment, “an image popped into [his] head of... an Everyman character who decides to ‘break bad’ and become a criminal” (267). With that, Walter was born – an underachiever who is overqualified for his profession, having taken a paltry buyout from a company that would later be worth billions.¹⁹

Walter’s primary function as a character is to undergo an immoral evolution. Actor Bryan Cranston offers his thoughts on his character: “Under the circumstances—need, greed, whatever the case may be, depression—you push those buttons at the right time and anyone can become dangerous. And that’s what happened to Walter White.”²⁰ It is Walter’s unremarkable qualities that (initially) endear him to the audience, and increase the authenticity of his loss of morality. The transition from everyman to antihero is atypical of morality plays, but could not exist without them.

¹⁹ “Buyout.” *Breaking Bad*. American Movie Classics. AMC, New York City. 19 Aug. 2012. Television.

²⁰ Snierson, Dan. “‘Breaking Bad’ at Comic-Con: Bryan Cranston and co. talk favorite, challenging moments.” *Entertainment Weekly*. Entertainment Weekly and Time Inc., 21 Jul. 2013. Web. 26 October 2014.

As in the morality play, the characters of *Breaking Bad* exist in an extremely moral universe. This morality is implicit rather than explicit. Gilligan has previously observed that in modern television, the relationship between actions and consequences is often left unexplored, phrasing the matter thusly: “In real life... when bad things happen, big or little, they tend to resonate with us... Luckily I’ve never killed anybody, but I’d have to think that it would stay with you... I’d have to think that pulling the trigger and killing someone would haunt you for the rest of your days. That’s not what’s portrayed on TV normally.”²¹ This theme of characters suffering the repercussions of their misdeeds is prominent in *Breaking Bad*, and reminiscent of the morality play.

The consequences are particularly far-reaching in season 2, which opens with the image of a child’s pink plush bear, floating in a swimming pool – everything else in the image is shown in grayscale.²² The bear is missing an eyeball and appears to be completely burned on one side. This motif foreshadows the events of the season 2 finale: a midair collision between a Boeing 737 and a noncommercial airliner.²³ This proves to be the mistake of a single air traffic controller, racked with grief over the heroin-related asphyxiation of his daughter,²⁴ which Walter witnessed but chose not to prevent.²⁵

Figure 1.²⁶

²¹ Gilligan, Vince. Interviewed by Paul MacInnes. “*Breaking Bad* creator Vince Gilligan: the man who turned Walter White from Mr. Chips into Scarface.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media Limited, 2012. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.

²² “*Seven Thiry-Seven*.” *Breaking Bad*. American Movie Classics. AMC, New York City. 8 Mar. 2009. Television.

²³ “*ABQ*.” *Breaking Bad*. American Movie Classics. AMC, New York City. 31 May 2009.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

²⁵ “*Phoenix*.” *Breaking Bad*. American Movie Classics. AMC, New York City. 24 May 2009. Television.

²⁶ “*ABQ*.” *Breaking Bad*. American Movie Classics. AMC, New York City. 31 May 2009.



It is, apparently, debris from one of the aircraft (see figure 1). Its detached eye is absent from the image above, but it resurfaces repeatedly throughout the following season, as if to suggest divine judgment. The collision itself, meanwhile, is emblematic of the anguish Walter has wrought upon those closest to him (at this point, Skyler has taken their children and left him to his own devices). The sequence is somewhat farfetched, but the message it delivers is clear. Characters in *Breaking Bad* are unable to escape ramifications of their crimes.

An image in the final season of *Breaking Bad* has similar gravity, and is drawn from Percy Bysshe Shelley's 1818 poem "Ozymandias," after which the episode is named. The poem centers on the inevitable decline of leaders, and the biblical axiom that pride comes before the fall. The poem is excerpted here:

*"...Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read*

*Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed...”²⁷*

In this particular episode of *Breaking Bad*, as Gilligan says, “a great many chickens... come home to roost” for Walter. A chief example is when the neo-Nazi gang White Power murders his brother-in-law before his eyes. The image of the grieving Walter is reproduced below, in Figure 2.

Figure 2.²⁸



One can liken his position and expression to the monument of Ramesses II described in the poem, the “half-sunk... shattered visage.” Walter’s surroundings, the cold deserts of Albuquerque, New Mexico, mirror the lines:

*“...Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”*

²⁷ “Ozymandias.” *Poetry Foundation*. Shelley, Percy Bysshe. Poetry Foundation, 2014. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.

²⁸ “Ozymandias.” *Breaking Bad*. American Movie Classics. AMC, New York City. 15 Sep. 2013. Television.

This image in the text is strongly connected to Gilligan's overarching maxim that "there is some comeuppance... even if it takes years or decades to happen."²⁹

In the beginning, Walter maintains that any and all of his criminal activity is for the benefit of his family. But the audience comes to the realization that Walter has built his empire in pursuit of power and supremacy. In *Ozymandias*, that empire crumbles beneath his feet, satisfying a moral imperative for just punishment.

Perhaps one of the morality play's most prominent tropes is the representative nature of its characters. Its characters are personifications of such attributes as "Justice" and "Equity."³⁰ Modern television programs do not include characters whose names are as literal as those found in *The Summoning of Everyman*, or, to use an alternate example, *Mundus et Infans*, in which the protagonist Manhood represents all of humanity.³¹ Nor does *Breaking Bad*, with names such as Walter, Jesse, and Skyler. Still, they are representative characters. Like in the morality play, they personify different values, although those values are not explicitly included in the text.

First, there is the supporting character of Jesse Pinkman. He is Walter's protégé in some ways and his plaything in others; he draws much sympathy from the audience, through the many instances in which Walter manipulates him for his own ends. Jesse serves as the personification of innocence. This is ironic, because his life of crime predates that of Walter.

²⁹ Segal, David. "Art of Darkness." *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*. 6 Jul. 2011: MM18. Print.

³⁰ Appelbaum, Stanley, and Ward, Candice, eds. *Everyman and Other Miracle & Morality Plays*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995. Print.

³¹ Lester, G.A. ed. *Three Late Medieval Morality Plays: Everyman, Mankind, and Mundus et Infans*. London: A&C Black Publishers Limited, 1990. Print.

In the latter half of *Breaking Bad*, Walter's transformation is nearing completion: he seems to revel in his power and "the empire business."³² It is Jesse who wishes to wash his hands of their business.³³ Walter intends to continue manufacturing narcotics, whereas Jesse insists that they step aside and sell the last of their resources to a rival gang from the Midwest. The premise of the program initially suggests that Walter, the innocuous schoolteacher, has entered a line of work that doesn't suit him, resulting in his descent into villainy. In fact, it is Jesse who is unfit for the immoral lifestyle, and his reaction to the felonies that he commits or is coerced into committing emphasize his innocence.

In the text, nothing awakens Jesse's disquiet more than the death of Drew Sharpe. Drew Sharpe is a child who happens to witness Walter, Jesse and their accomplices robbing a train of chemicals.³⁴ Todd Alquist, a minor character, fatally shoots the boy, and Jesse is later haunted by the event. Walter, however, is to be seen whistling in a later episode, which Jesse interprets as a sign of callousness. Jesse's moral agency – especially when juxtaposed against Walter's lack of conscience – shows that he is indeed the incarnation of the innocent.

Another example of a character with a defining value is Hank Schrader, Walter's brother-in-law and an agent for the Drug Enforcement Administration, who is a representation of justice. He possesses many of the moral characteristics that Walter lacks. He is also relentless in his pursuit of criminals: when he discovers that the kingpin Heisenberg is in fact Walter himself, he (Hank) immediately conducts an investigation so

³² "Buyout." *Breaking Bad*. American Movie Classics. AMC, New York City. 19 Aug. 2012. Television.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ "Dead Freight." *Breaking Bad*. American Movie Classics. AMC, New York City. 12 Aug. 2012. Television.

as to successfully indict Walter.³⁵ Despite their familial connection, Hank does not afford Walter any special treatment, saying, “He’s not getting off that easy.”³⁶ This is evident of the strict code of ethics by which Hank abides.

There are times at which this defining virtue of Hank falters – primarily, his savage attack on Jesse, who he suspects of threatening his wife.³⁷ Hank, however, immediately admits his fault in the matter regardless of his contempt and anger. He acknowledges that his actions were a betrayal of his respect for law enforcement, and “that’s not who [he’s] supposed to be.”³⁸ He has a moral consistency that does not appear in other characters.

Figure 3:³⁹

³⁵ “*Blood Money.*” *Breaking Bad*. American Movie Classics. AMC, New York City. 11 Aug. 2013. Television.

³⁶ “*Confessions.*” *Breaking Bad*. American Movie Classics. AMC, New York City. 25 Aug. 2013. Television.

³⁷ “*One Minute.*” *Breaking Bad*. American Movie Classics. AMC, New York City. 2 May 2010. Television.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ “*Ozymandias.*” *Breaking Bad*. American Movie Classics. AMC, New York City. 15 Sep. 2013. Television.



Consider Hank’s death by the gang White Power, in the aforementioned episode *Ozymandias* (see figure 3). Walter begs Jack Welker, the would-be killer, to spare Hank. He also attempts to make the interaction personal – When Jack refers to Hank as “fed,”⁴⁰ Walter insists that he use the real name. But Hank resists, saying: “My name is ASAC Schrader”⁴¹ (his formal title, Assistant Special Agent in Charge). As the perennial image of justice, he refuses to grovel, despite his full awareness that Jack is about to kill him. Hank’s conscience and rigid moral code hold true from the beginning of the series to his death in its antepenultimate episode.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

VI. Differences

Given the five or six centuries that have elapsed between the prominence of morality plays and the creation of *Breaking Bad*, it is not surprising that they have significant differences. It is discussed above that the primary goal of morality plays was to proselytize, while any attempt of *Breaking Bad* to preach to its audiences comes across merely in themes and symbolism. And while *Breaking Bad* is not without some religious reference, a fundamental difference between the two texts is their treatment of the afterlife.

Again, in *The Summoning of Everyman*, the story is centered entirely on Everyman's struggle to cross over to the afterlife with a clean conscience and Good Deeds at his side. Morality plays could not exist without the unquestionable faith in an afterlife. Walter, however, through his language and his actions, suggests zero faith in an afterlife.

Recall the premise of the program: Walter aims to cook crystal methamphetamine in an effort to leave his wife and children a sufficient amount of money after he expires from terminal lung cancer. The takeaway from this is that the absolute ending to Walter's master plan is his demise, and he plans no further. This becomes clear in season 3, in the episode titled *Fly*, in which Walter and Jesse commit to the removal of a housefly that has entered their laboratory.

Figure 4:⁴²

⁴² "Fly." *Breaking Bad*. American Movie Classics. AMC, New York City. 23 May 2010. Television.



From an analytical standpoint, the visual hierarchy here is simple. The downward angle from which the audience watches Walter and Jesse is judgmental, regarding the sins of both characters, but Jesse is still positioned above Walter, as he is innocent at his core. (Furthermore, Walter has not yet confessed his guilt in Jesse's former lover's overdose, but comes extremely close to doing so in this very scene.) At this point in the episode, Jesse attempts to swat the fly while Walter succumbs to the sedative Jesse has given him.

As he slowly drifts out of consciousness, Walter reflects that he has lived too long, and searches his memory for what might have been the perfect moment to die. The first criterion is that he "had to have enough [money]... none of this makes sense if [he] didn't have enough."⁴³ Second, "it had to be before [Skyler] found out."⁴⁴ At this point in the series, Skyler already has discovered the truth, so the opportunity for him to untether himself from his wrongdoings and his life on Earth has passed. Instead his cancer is in

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

remission, and there is “no end in sight.”⁴⁵ Walter’s wish to die at a specific moment in time is reflected in his obsessive fixation on the housefly, a “fly in the ointment” of his master plan, so to speak. Furthermore, it demonstrates his undying faith in science, and his need to “respect the chemistry.”⁴⁶ While characters and audiences of morality plays aspire to an afterlife, Walter is preoccupied only with the events that transpire while he is alive.

Breaking Bad and the morality play are also dissimilar in their depictions of good versus evil. Morality plays were a form of public service announcement, borne of the predominant ideology of the time period that mankind is able to control his post-death destiny through his actions on Earth.⁴⁷ As a result, it was in the nature of these medieval texts to depict their heroes with a positive arc – in *The Summoning of Everyman*, for example, the title character learns the virtues of a pious life, characterized not by the accumulation of material possessions but by good deeds. While Everyman ultimately becomes a better person, Walter undergoes a transformation that is quite the opposite.

It is in the nature of the morality play to center on good, whereas *Breaking Bad*, and many similar television dramas in the 21st century tend to center on evil. With each season of the program, Walter is seen committing more violent crimes and making more immoral decisions. He continues his drug trade even after Skyler, his wife and the program’s initial moral center, leaves him.⁴⁸ The justification for his illegality is gone,

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ “Más.” *Breaking Bad*. American Movie Classics. AMC, New York City. 18 Apr. 2010. Television.

⁴⁷ “Morality Play (dramatic genre).” *Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica, 16 Jan. 2014. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.

⁴⁸ “Green Light.” *Breaking Bad*. American Movie Classics. AMC, New York City. 11 Apr. 2010. Television.

but that seems to have little or no effect on his choices, because he is so enamored with the business and the chemistry.

The arc of Everyman, and similar characters, goes in the reverse direction. The character Good Deeds agrees to meet Death with him, because the play's overarching message is of the importance of good deeds. By the close of *Breaking Bad*, Walter appears utterly devoid of that moral compass. In the words of Ross Douthat, a columnist for the opinion pages of *The New York Times*, Walter is "a protagonist who deliberately abandons the light for the darkness."⁴⁹ In terms of their depictions of good and evil, *Breaking Bad* is more an inversion of the morality play than a likeness.

⁴⁹ Douthat, Ross. "Good and Evil on Cable." *The New York Times: The Opinion Pages*. The New York Times Company, 28 Jul. 2011. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.

VII. Conclusion

Breaking Bad shares many of the conventions of the morality play, but critical differences arise from the separate purposes, eras and audiences of the two forms.

Breaking Bad does not aim merely to encourage viewers to live a life of righteousness and morality. This largely is what made morality plays what they were, while miracle plays enacted saintly interventions and mystery plays enacted other biblical tales.

Where morality plays were concerned with proselytization, *Breaking Bad* was concerned with art. This difference between the two texts is a reflection of the time period in which they were created. The environment of the morality play was extremely religious, as opposed to the secular environment that has fostered the third golden age of television.

Breaking Bad captivated audiences with its morally ambiguous stories. This ambiguity was fundamental to the program – the audience witnessed Walter’s misdeeds and their consequences and was left to conclude who is good and who is bad. During the course of the series, Walter’s choices were zealously debated on social media as well as conventional media. Gilligan’s ultimate motivation was to “make people question who they’re pulling for, and why.”⁵⁰ This abiding concern with good and evil is *Breaking Bad*’s greatest similarity with the morality play, but in its willingness to leave the choice to the viewer, *Breaking Bad* represents an evolution and an expansion of the genre’s conventions.

⁵⁰ Bowles, Scott. “‘Breaking Bad’ shows man at his worst in season 4.” *USA Today*. Gannett Co. Inc., 13 Jul. 2011. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.

Works Cited

- “*America is Turning Secular Much Faster Than we Realise.*” *The Telegraph*. Telegraph Media Group Limited, 20 Feb. 2014. Web.
- Appelbaum, Stanley, and Ward, Candice, eds. *Everyman and Other Miracle & Morality Plays*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995. Print.
- Bender, H. Eric. “Rise of the Antihero.” *Psychology Today: Broadcast Thought*. Sussex Publishers, LLC, 29 Sep. 2013. Web. 26 October 2014.
- Bowles, Scott. “‘Breaking Bad’ shows man at his worst in season 4.” *USA Today*. Gannett Co. Inc., 13 Jul. 2011. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.
- Breaking Bad: The Complete Series*. Writ. Sam Catlin, Vince Gilligan, Peter Gould, George Mastras, Thomas Schnauz, and Moira Walley-Beckett. Dir. Phil Abraham, Adam Bernstein, Tricia Brock, Colin Bucksey, Bryan Cranston, John Dahl, Félix Enrique Alcalá, Vince Gilligan, Charles Haid, Bronwen Hughes, Tim Hunter, Michelle MacLaren, Terry McDonough, Jim McKay, Peter Medak, Johan Renck, John Shiban, David Slade, Michael Slovis, and Scott Winant. High Bridge Entertainment, Gran Via Productions, Sony Pictures Television, 2008-2013. Blu-Ray.
- Douthat, Ross. “Good and Evil on Cable.” *The New York Times: The Opinion Pages*. The New York Times Company, 28 Jul. 2011. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.
- Gilligan, Vince. “‘Breaking Bad’: Vince Gilligan on Meth and Morals.” Fresh Air. By Terry Gross. National Public Radio. WHYY, Philadelphia. 19 Sep. 2011. Radio.

- Gilligan, Vince. Interviewed by Paul MacInnes. “*Breaking Bad* creator Vince Gilligan: the man who turned Walter White from Mr. Chips into Scarface.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media Limited, 2012. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.
- Lester, G.A. ed. *Three Late Medieval Morality Plays: Everyman, Mankind, and Mundus et Infans*. London: A&C Black Publishers Limited, 1990. Print.
- Martin, Brett. *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution*. New York: Penguin Group, 2013. Print.
- “Morality Play (dramatic genre).” *Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica, 16 Jan. 2014. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.
- Mudd, Philip. Interviewed by Stephen Colbert. *The Colbert Report*. 12 Sep. 2014. Television.
- “Ozymandias.” *Poetry Foundation*. Shelley, Percy Bysshe. Poetry Foundation, 2014. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.
- Schwarzbaum, Lisa. “No More Mr. Nice Guys.” *The New York Times* 14 Jul. 2013: BR12. Print.
- Segal, David. “Art of Darkness.” *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*. 6 Jul. 2011: MM18. Print.
- Snierson, Dan. “‘*Breaking Bad*’ at Comic-Con: Bryan Cranston and co. talk favorite, challenging moments.” *Entertainment Weekly*. Entertainment Weekly and Time Inc., 21 Jul. 2013. Web. 26 October 2014.
- Watson, Peter. *Ideas: A History of Thought and Invention, from Fire to Freud*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2006. Print.