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“SAY MY NAME”: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTER WALTER
WHITE BASED ON THE CONCEPTS OF NARRATOLOGY

Santa Maria, RS
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Trabalho Final de Graduação apresentado
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Língua Inglesa, da Universidade Federal
de Santa Maria (UFSM, RS), como
requisito parcial para a obtenção do título
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Orientadora: Prof.^a Dr.^a Mônica Stefani

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“I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it,
I was really... I was alive.” (Walter White,
Breaking Bad S05E16 “Felina”, 2013)

ABSTRACT

“SAY MY NAME”: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTER WALTER WHITE BASED ON THE CONCEPTS OF NARRATOLOGY

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This paper offers an analysis of character development that will portray the protagonist of the North American TV show “Breaking Bad”. Walter White, who is also the inspiration for the title of this work, is an emblematic character in his own way, and, as such, the question inevitably rises: why is this character successful and how is such success represented on the screen, through the narrative. The series comprises five seasons, and aired in the United States for five years (from 2008 to 2013). From the corpus composed of 62 episodes, for the analysis we will choose five selected and representative scenes, one from each season, seeking for answers found in the theoretical framework provided by narratology (BAL, 1999; GOMES, 1970; EAGLETON, 2013) to observe Walter White’s strength as a character and how he is built.

Keywords: Character. Breaking Bad. Narratology. Walter White.

RESUMO

“**SAY MY NAME**”: UMA ANÁLISE DO PERSONAGEM WALTER WHITE COM BASE NOS CONCEITOS DE NARRATOLOGIA

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Este artigo oferece uma análise do desenvolvimento do personagem que retratará o protagonista do programa de TV norte-americano “Breaking Bad”. Walter White, que também inspira o título desta obra, é um personagem emblemático à sua maneira e, como tal, surge inevitavelmente a questão: por que esse personagem faz sucesso e como esse sucesso é representado na tela, através da narrativa. A série é composta por cinco temporadas e foi ao ar nos Estados Unidos durante cinco anos (de 2008 a 2013). Do corpus composto por 62 episódios, para a análise escolheremos cinco cenas selecionadas e representativas, uma de cada temporada, buscando respostas encontradas no referencial teórico fornecido pela narratologia (BAL, 1999; GOMES, 1970; EAGLETON, 2013), a fim de observar a força de Walter White como personagem e como ele é construído.

Palavras-chave: Personagem. Breaking Bad. Narratologia. Walter White.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION.....	8
2 CONTEXTUALISATION: MORE ABOUT “BREAKING BAD”	11
3 WHAT’S IN A CHARACTER: SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS.....	13
4 ANALYSIS: HOW WALTER WHITE IS PORTRAYED.....	15
4.1 SCENE 1: SEASON 1, EPISODE NUMBER 5 “GRAY MATTER”	19
4.2 SCENE 2: SEASON 2, EPISODE NUMBER 1 “737”	22
4.3 SCENE 3: SEASON 3, EPISODE NUMBER 5 “But”	24
4.4 SCENE 4: SEASON 4, EPISODE NUMBER 6 “Cornered”	26
4.5 SCENE 5: SEASON 5, EPISODE NUMBER 7 “Say My Name”	29
5 FINAL REMARKS.....	33
6 REFERENCES.....	35

1 INTRODUCTION

It is known across the world that great characters make great stories, so in this research we will try to better understand why that saying seems to hold true. The main character from the North American TV series “Breaking Bad” (2008), by Vince Gilligan is the main topic for this study. With a plot featuring at the beginning Walter White, who is a nice guy, transforming his journey on the screen completely, ending it in an utterly different way, leaving the spectator mulling about such an outcome.

In terms of academic relevance, it is important to highlight that the success the series has enjoyed with audiences around the world is also seen in the academy in Brazil, thus justifying the choice of this topic for a final paper in the course of Modern Languages. For instance, after brief research on the CAPES repository using as search terms “Breaking Bad”, more than 20 relevant results were retrieved considering the years 2015 and 2022¹, involving basically theses and dissertations. We can cite many topics that were addressed in those works, such as racial aspects (like the performances of whiteness and what they represent in the series), semiotic analysis (mainly connected to courses in communication), family archetypes (specially in sociology and law), and also including White’s field of study, chemistry (with ideas of how to use the series to take advantage of its subject-matter to improve the learning process). From these results, the one that called our attention the most was a Master’s thesis entitled “Processos de criação do personagem Walter White em Breaking Bad: Entendendo o Perigo” (in a free translation “Creation processes of the character Walter White in “Breaking Bad”: understanding danger”), presented by Osmar Guerra Junior at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo in 2018. As part of that work, we can cite that the motivation of the author with his work was to analyze critically how Vince Gilligan made Walter White as he is, in the cinematic industry of the early 2000s, without losing the focus on what was being presented. Guerra Junior (2018) also says that Gilligan made something creative with that show, making the protagonist face major changes and still not lose the essence of his very being. The element of similarity carried over through all five seasons where from one season to another the difference was not something so tangible and yet if you compare the first

¹ Research carried out on 17th October 2023, available at: <https://catalogodeteses.capes.gov.br/catalogo-teses/#/> Accessed on 17 Oct. 2023.

to the last there is an immense gap between them. Which was filled through the development of the said character and how he endured his own journey.

When we study a novel, or any literary text, we can see the importance of character development, since it is one of the elements that compose any narrative and sets the pace of the story, and whose features are created according to the reader's imagination. Now, when we decide to analyze characters, whose features are visible, the matter is a little different, requiring a different theoretical frame.

Thus, this study analyzes the creation and development of the character Walter White, observing how his journey contributes (or not) to the reception of the narrative by the spectators, and guided by the concepts coined in narratology. The analysis will focus most thoroughly on the inhibitions part of White's mind. There are psychopath traits in him that only through an analysis will we be able to distinguish the elements portrayed.

Walter White starts his journey as a chemistry teacher from a local high school in Albuquerque, in the State of New Mexico. He makes more than minimum wage but he has to support a pregnant wife and a son who has a mental illness, which certainly does not pose an easy situation. The bills keep coming, and the money they have is barely enough to pay the mortgage of the house. When things do not seem to worsen, White finds out he has lung cancer, at an advanced stage already. After pretty much hitting rock bottom, he decides to become a drug dealer and sell methamphetamine. He was an ordinary man, an ordinary teacher, an honest man, but sometimes enough is enough, and that changed the course of his life permanently.

According to the English literary scholar Terry Eagleton, when considering the work with characters in analysis:

Emma Woodhouse, the heroine of Jane Austen's novel *Emma*, exists only as long as somebody is reading about her. If nobody is reading about her at any given time (an unlikely eventuality, given the brilliance of the novel and the billions of English-language readers in the world), she lapses into non-existence. Emma does not survive the conclusion of *Emma*. She lives in a text, not a grand country mansion, and a text is a transaction between itself and a reader. A book is a material object which exists even if nobody picks it up, but this is not true of a text. A text is a pattern of meaning, and patterns of meaning do not lead lives of their own, like snakes or sofas (EAGLETON, 2013, p. 46).

When thinking of what Eagleton presents in his excerpt, we can apply that to characters spectators watch on television. Thus, Walter White does not exist in real life, only in the context of the series "Breaking Bad". However, such as Austen's

characters, his power in terms of character construction is enormous that it is not by chance that it is quite common for audiences to relate themselves with White or other characters portrayed in the story. Indeed, character bonding plays a very important role in this case, as mentioned by Rachel Nuwer in her article “The Psychology of Character Bonding: Why We Feel a Real Connection to Actors” (2013)². According to her words:

Just as we do with real-life friends and family, in our minds we subconsciously fill in the details of characters’ lives that are missing. This may include episodes from their past, what they’re thinking or what they were up to when we weren’t around, which only heightens their sense of realness. At the same time, for the duration of the film or story, we may get to know those characters more personally than we know some of our own loved ones. Narration gives us a window into their thoughts, and the story allows us to peek in on their most private affairs.

Sometimes, even characters that we did not initially like can redeem themselves. Directors often play with the notion of first impressions—which can be very strong—gradually building our sympathy for a person who at first repulsed us (NUWER, 2013).

There are several elements of character bonding in this TV series, such as the superhuman characters, the villains and the anti-heroes, the regular person one, and others. The “regular person” aspect, for instance, is easily portrayed by Walter White in “Breaking Bad”, due to the fact that they are more complex and flawed than a hero, and yet sometimes they pull off some amazing stunts. In other moments they are forced to choose an evil path because an unjust society forces them to. In those moments the audience, who is already attached to this character and understands what he has done to be where he is, can even acknowledge the calamities this person does.

That is a strong bond, and it does not come lightly. In the next item we will contextualize the creation of “Breaking Bad”.

² Available at: <https://www.motionpictures.org/2013/07/the-psychology-of-character-bonding-why-we-feel-a-real-connection-to-actors/> Accessed on: 26 Sep. 2023.

2 CONTEXTUALISATION: MORE ABOUT “BREAKING BAD”

Before presenting the analysis of its protagonist, it is important to contextualize the TV show. This also justifies why we highlight that this series was created for television, since streaming services were not as popular as they are by the time of the writing of this paper, in a way accounting for the reception of this audiovisual production.

“Breaking Bad” is a North American TV series created by Vince Gilligan (1967), who has, among other works, “The X-Files” (where he was an executive producer and which was a tremendous success in the sci-fi field in the 1990s and the first years of 2000). Gilligan won the Emmy for “Breaking Bad”, having helped the channel win accolades and recognition in a very competitive market in terms of television entertainment.

This show portrays the life of the chemist Walter White (Bryan Cranston), a brilliant frustrated man that teaches High School teenagers while he deals with the problems that keep coming to his life during the show. However, because of his dissatisfaction with his eventless and mediocre life, he decides, together with his partner, Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul), to use his expertise to inject more emotion into his days: to try to make a living by selling methamphetamine while also avoiding getting arrested, all these events taking place in the city of Albuquerque, New Mexico, in the South of the United States.

The TV series seems to focus on characters always trying to avoid bad situations, such as not getting killed by the people who they are doing business with, and, if that is not bad enough, Walter's brother-in-law, Hank Schrader (played by Dean Norris), is also a Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent who particularly focuses on methamphetamine cases.

The “Breaking Bad” pilot was launched in January 2008 and its last episode was aired in September 2013, thus running for five years. The series was originally accepted by the AMC Channel in Brazil. The AXN channel was responsible for exhibiting it. Later on, Netflix got the Breaking Bad rights to exhibit it online also in the free-to-air TV channels we got Rede Record and Bandeirantes. The show had five seasons and each one of them had 13 episodes except for the first one that had only 7 episodes. Some of them even have encoded messages. For instance, in season 2,

the 737 plane fell on top of ABQ: if you mix the names of the episodes, you would see the spoiler right off the bat even though you were only supposed to hear about it in the last episode of the season.

The show has been a huge success. For instance, the review by Jonah Goldberg of *The National Review* says that “[Vince] Gilligan calls it ‘a slow-motion Wolfman story. [...] The change that... takes place in Walter is so gradual, so human, that viewers are hard pressed to relinquish their fondness for him...”.

In terms of aesthetic effect, the words by Matthew St. Blanc (2017) seem apt in this context:

Anna Faktorovich, who wrote her own review of the show in the *Pennsylvania Literary Journal* wrote [sic], “To be frank, the actors in *Breaking Bad* are some of the ugliest people on prime-time TV...” and although she intended this as harsh criticism, this was exactly the kind of visual representation the show’s producers intended. *Breaking Bad* was never meant to make the viewers feel good about what was happening. It was about watching a man, any man, really, using his pride, greed, and anger to transform himself into a nefarious, vile character (ST. BLANC, 2017).

The series is powerful in intertextuality, mainly for literary academics. In one scene, towards the end of the narrative, when events start to change against White, the play with the initials of his name, mimicking or masquerading the initials of another equally famous name in North American Literature, the author of *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman, also evinces a subtle opportunity to deal with icons in North American culture. Also, the book appears there not accidentally: its main motif is to sing the importance of the material world and the role of the individual in nature. In this case, the connection could be considered; “*Song of Myself*” would epitomize the series motif.

3 WHAT'S IN A CHARACTER: SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It should be initially noted here that the theoretical references presented come from the field of literary analysis, but at the same time we should stress our belief as analysts that some of the concepts can be effectively applied to the analysis of characters in audiovisual productions since we are dealing basically with fictional narratives, with characters and plots being constructed following literary techniques. As such, when looking for concepts that can guide us in our study, the first thing we do is to check what we mean by “character” in this paper:

Today, the term ‘character’ means an individual’s mental and moral qualities, as in Prince Andrew’s comment that being shot at during the Falklands War was ‘very character-building’. Perhaps he would care to have his character built a little more often. The word also, of course, refers to figures in novels, plays, movies and the like. We still use the term of actual people, however, as in ‘Who were those characters throwing up out of the Vatican window?’ It can also mean a capricious or idiosyncratic individual, as in ‘By God, sir, he’s a character!’ The phrase is interestingly used more about men than about women, and reflects a very English delight in eccentricity. The English tend to admire curmudgeonly, nonconformist types who make a point of not fitting in with their fellows. Such oddballs are agreeably incapable of being anything but themselves. People who carry a stoat on their shoulder or wear brown paper bags over their heads are said to be characters, which suggests that their aberrations are to be genially indulged. There is a spirit of tolerance about the word ‘character’. It saves you from having to take certain people into protective custody (EAGLETON, 2013, p. 49-50).

In addition to the description offered by Eagleton (2013), we have other references, such as the one presented by Mieke Bal, differentiating between character and actor:

By this, I mean the actor provided with distinctive characteristics which together create the effect of a character. In the course of this section, the difference between the general, abstract term *actor* and the more specific term *character* will gradually become clearer. To begin with, more often than not a character resembles a human being and an actor need not necessarily do so. (...) For the moment, let us assume that a character is the effect that occurs when an actor is endowed with distinctive human characteristics. In this view, an actor is a structural position, while a character is a complex semantic unit. But as readers, we ‘see’ characters, only reducible to actors in a process of abstraction (BAL, 1999, p. 114-115).

The character on the screen is portrayed by a real person, in this case Bryan Cranston. He is so worldly known nowadays for his work in "Breaking Bad" that it is almost impossible to look at him and not see Walter White. In the book *A personagem de ficção* ["The character of fiction" in a free translation] (1970), the Brazilian film critic

Paulo Emilio Sales Gomes (1916-1977) claims that a character is made of words and there are even cinematic characters that are only made with that, and no screen time at all:

There are cinematic characters made exclusively of words, at first glance at least. The example that immediately occurs is evidently the film version [by Alfred Hitchcock] of the novel *Rebeca*. When the tape begins, *Rebeca* has already died and, as there is no visualization of events that occurred previously, we only get to know her thanks to the dialogues of the characters before our eyes. But it would be absurd to claim that the character's extraordinary presence is due to the exclusive power of words. The dimension acquired by the words exchanged between the present characters about the absent one is always conditioned by the visual context in which they are inserted. We get to know, just like, the atmosphere of the house where *Rebeca* lived, at least one of her dresses, and above all we contemplate the particular tone that acquires not only the voice, but the physiognomy of people, each time they refer to her (GOMES, 1970, p. 110)³.

From the corpus available to us, which consists of 62 episodes, we selected five scenes - one from each episode in each season, which marks a timeline into Walter White's life and transformation. This transformation happens every time the character faces a crossroad and has to make a decision. Our aim is to observe his actions and decisions how Walter White manages to capture the attention of the spectator and make them realize that human traits of good and evil are constituent parts of anyone.

³ In the original in Brazilian Portuguese: Há personagens cinematográficas feitas exclusivamente de palavras, à primeira vista pelo menos. O exemplo que logo ocorre é evidentemente a versão cinematográfica [de Alfred Hitchcock] do romance *Rebeca*. Quando a fita começa, *Rebeca* já morreu e, como não há nenhuma visualização de fatos ocorridos anteriormente, só ficamos conhecendo-a graças aos diálogos das personagens que temos diante dos olhos. Mas seria absurdo pretender que se deve ao exclusivo poder da palavra a extraordinária presença da personagem. A dimensão adquirida pelas palavras trocadas entre as personagens presentes acerca da ausente fica sempre condicionada ao contexto visual onde se inserem. Ficamos conhecendo, tal qual, o ambiente da casa onde *Rebeca* viveu, pelo menos um vestido seu, e sobretudo contemplamos o tom particular que adquire não só a voz, mas a fisionomia das pessoas, cada vez que a ela se referem (GOMES, 1970, p. 110).

4 ANALYSIS: HOW WALTER WHITE IS PORTRAYED

In this item we will focus on Walter White, emphasizing his features and journey in his own narrative path. Indeed, considering St. Blanc's words: "The show is unbelievably dark in its story arc and the producers made sure that this darkness was presented on the screen as well" (2017). Walter Hardwell White is a fictional character who came to life through the performance of the North American actor Bryan Cranston (1956) that took place for the majority of 7 years in international television. Indeed, regarding his performance, we should consider the following:

Cranston, previously most recognizable as a comedic actor having starred in the sitcom *Malcolm in the Middle*, no doubt found the role challenging, having to pull all his skills together to form this man/monster amalgamation. Throughout the show these changes in Walter White's persona seemed to flow from Cranston organically as he effortlessly flowed between the average man that he was to the nefarious, power hungry, Heisenberg (ST. BLANC, 2017).

As this is an exercise in character analysis, how could we describe Walter White? The words by the North American television theorist Jason Mittell need to be considered, because "while we want to gauge a character's interiority, we judge characters mostly by what they do, cued by how other characters regard, interact with, and talk about them" (MITTELL, 2015). We get impressions on his behavior from the interpretation of other viewers, like Matthew St. Blanc, whose comment is presented next:

James Poniewozik of Time Magazine said in his review of the show "He's not just a criminal who's like us... he was one of us..." So how could such an average man, someone so meek and unassuming, one of us, become so broken that he completely transforms into this detestable monster, Heisenberg? (ST. BLANC, 2017).

In "Breaking Bad", it is possible to visualize what the American television theorist Jason Mittell (2015) mentions in terms of character development, emphasizing the existence of four types: 1) character growth, "[...] evoking the process of maturation in which a character becomes more realized and fleshed out over time" (MITTELL, 2015); 2) character education, "[...] in which a mature adult learns a key life lesson over the course of a series and ends up a changed person" (MITTELL, 2015); 3) character overhaul, "[...] in which someone undergoes a dramatic sudden shift, [...] but we retain our serial memories of earlier events and relationships" (MITTELL, 2015); and

4) character transformation, where there would be “[...] a gradual shift of morality, attitudes, and sense of self that manifests itself in altered actions and long-term repercussions” (MITTEL, 2015).

At the beginning of the story, we would see an ordinary 49-year-old man who works as a High School chemistry teacher, in preparation to turn 50 still during the pilot. As previously mentioned, he did not exactly live the American dream, so his brother-in-law offered him to go on a drug bust to get some excitement in his life. In the first episode, White had been diagnosed a few days earlier with lung cancer, which was already at an advanced stage, even though they were not fully aware of how much it was. Therefore, on the birthday episode, he had a change of heart. After all, why not drastically change the situation that is going from bad to worse. With the threat of death not being there anymore, there was nothing to fear, at least not regarding his own safety.

This character goes through a lot of growth and development during his appearances in the show, and for sure he is not the same when it ends. He is not even the same from one episode to another. It is a constant change, and for us to analyze it we have to go chronologically step by step into any small change he suffers in order to see the big picture. If we compare the White from the pilot episode to the White from episode two, there will be some significant changes, but not that much. It is much more tangible and explicit when we compare the pilot with the series finale though.

The first episode has so many changes in this man’s life that some of us would have to endure a lifetime before even having to face some of these. He discovered he had cancer, he started doing illegal activities, i.e., manufacturing methamphetamine, and finally murder on what we can assume second degree. That is a lot for a first episode. No wonder he was going through some major changes.

In the follow up episode, he had an even bigger problem. One of his “victims” somehow survived the attempt to murder, so there was a body and an injured angry person to be dealt with. We should always keep in mind that this is a man of high morality, respected in his community and highly intelligent, which kind of deviates from the traditional profile of a serial killer or drug dealer, since he is by no means a murderer or a criminal. Until the moment he is. His mind does not think he is, just cannot believe it. The man who survived will probably kill him if he escapes, and yet he is not a murderer. He does not want to kill this man in cold blood. Although he asks for his partner to dispose of the body they are in possession. There are so many

contradictions present inside this character. His morality works sometimes, and in others, his ego speaks higher.

In episode 3, Walter finally makes peace with himself, realizing he is in fact a good man. He does not mean for any of this to happen; he decides to set the man free after some heart-to-heart talk. The only problem is that the man tried to kill Walter; so once again with no other choice, he commits the second murder. 3 episodes in, and we already have two victims to his name. That might not be the most innocent man in the show.

Walter White started the show being just a timid and depressed character who was often bullied, but after his seemingly ending diagnosis, he changes into a different person. A confident one, someone who is not afraid anymore of anything. He begins to chase his goals relentlessly, knowing that his days were about to be over. People in general procrastinate a lot, out of fear of the results or sheer laziness. So, this change in personality, the flip of the switch on Walter White, may have served him well. It is this change, this “wake up call” that makes him turn into the Heisenberg state, which in fact, has been there the whole time. The character does not change, he evolves. So, this evolution per se resulted in the product we see later on in the show. However, the Heisenberg was not released in a single blow, it was shocking indeed and yet not a complete transformation.

The fulminating change of personality from Walter White to Heisenberg may be easily seen in episode 6, when the main character decides to go bald, i.e., shave his hair completely. He is not in denial anymore; he accepts who he is and what he is going through. Later in the same episode, he explodes a building fearlessly and walks on the street with 50 thousand dollars, like it was routine. That is not the Walter we used to know so far. At least not the one the show has been portraying to us so far. Or is it? We as spectators have some glimpses of who he was, as well as pre scenes without context from what was about to happen. So, we know we could expect something big.

The director and the team behind the series eased into the common people the changes they were about to experience, to a level where the shock would not be that high, but even expected. However, things will escalate from this point forward. It takes the entire show for the Walter White to complete the Heisenberg transformation. There are episodes where the evolution of the character is harder to see, like the “Fly” episode (So3Ep10), whereas in others it is much more transparent. Each and every

episode is important though, each fragment of scene composes the man that was delivered in the final episode, to mimic what a real person would be like. People are shaped by their beliefs and experiences, and their morale and pride. Walter White is a complex character, he is subjected to change, his finale happened the way it was, because he had to die. He might even end up a different person, if he had time for redemption. Perhaps he would just resume his killing spree, but evidence here shows otherwise. Now, we will subdivide this chapter presenting the analysis of each of the five scenes selected.

4.1 SCENE 1: SEASON 1, EPISODE NUMBER 5 “GRAY MATTER”

From the scenes selected in this paper the first one is from season 1, episode number 5 called “Gray Matter”. During this episode we can see that White’s motives were clear. The episode starts with him and Skyler (played by Anna Gunn) going to a birthday pool party of an old friend called Elliot, who was married to one of Walt’s old girlfriends, Gretchen. The very first sentence he speaks during the way over is a complaint, calling his own gift stupid. He has not even arrived but already feels ashamed of what he is about to endure. When they finally arrive at the party, it is a mix of emotions.

They were overly dressed for that kind of festivity, a pool party: while everyone else is using simple beige clothes, the White couple is wearing flashy blue colors and they even joke about not receiving the “beige memo”. This whole arc sets the tone for the rest of the series. Walter White: this is a man who was destined to do great things and somehow lost his way. Now he must witness the success of his old friend, who was his colleague in grad school and even a partner in the company they created together. The size of Walt’s ego as mentioned before is colossal, so there is nothing more humiliating than being in the situation he was in. All his old friends are around, being successful and he is still making what he can to survive.

This birthday party also reflects on the pilot of the show, in which we have Walt’s own birthday. The protagonist of the show stood in the back, very low profile, and made a few smiles here and there while his brother-in-law was sitting at the center holding the spotlight. Telling stories about the DEA and even making a comment towards Walt as he should have some excitement in his life for a change, while in Elliot’s, he is the center of attention. When it comes the time to open his gifts, he is sitting at the center of everything while everyone is focused on him, wanting to glance at his expressions when the gifts are open.

After all that they arrive at the scene in question here, Elliot and Walt finally have the talk. In this scene there are two old friends, two old roommates that are being nostalgic about their past and sharing stories of a different life. The tone in this scene is very light, there are no problems, no concerns, just the two friends. The light during this shot is very bright, because of a light ambient. Until Elliot expresses that he misses those old times and mentions to Walt how Gray Matter is doing well but could do better. He says that there were some struggles in some fields where his old buddy Walter

could be of tremendous help, after all, White was considered to be some sort of a genius on the field. White, yet flattered about his proposal, feels that it is time for some honesty, and begins to share his current condition. He is playing it slowly, calling it personal problems, saying it is complicated, until Elliot cuts him off by saying they can help him, that they have excellent health insurance, even enforces this sentence with “the best”.

At this point, Walt realizes he did not say anything about his cancer, but Skylar did. For a very brief moment, Walter was at the same level as his peers. Maybe at a slightly higher level, since he was needed, desired even. Walt’s face shows genuine happiness maybe for the first time in the show. It is a bonding moment after all. So, it is possible to understand how awful he feels, and how dramatically his ego falls down, after he realizes that the whole reason his friend asked him to work together was out of pity. A request from Walt’s Wife Skyler. Out of mercy because his own wife is battling his fights for him.

The scene turns black: it is not a happy moment anymore. After that last humiliation, the characters immediately leave, thus ending the scene.

In this picture of the scene, it is possible to see the effects of light (the second picture is darker), signaling this important transition between the needed and strong persona of great chemist Walter White, former and founding partner of the billionaire company Gray Matter, and Walter White, the bankrupt humiliated high school teacher who needs the pity of his peers to keep on living in minimally decent conditions. Walt’s face shows defeat: he who thought he would finally be recognized for the genius he is, only to have his spirit crushed again. This leads to Walt rushing for the exit and even externalizing his anger to Skyler, who was trying to do him a favor, and yet that is the last thing he wants, due to his pride.

Image 1: Scene from the episode “Gray Matter”



Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=_IT-lgt2L5o&ab_channel=BreakingBad%26BetterCallSaul

4.2 SCENE 2: SEASON 2, EPISODE NUMBER 1 “737”

This scene is one of the very first of the second season. Walter and Jesse have just made their biggest sale yet with “Tuco”, big time drug dealer. Tuco does not miss the opportunity to violently assault a member of his own crew, leaving everyone terrified.

Once the sale is complete, Jesse and Walter goes into the car - which is often used in the series as a place to guarantee some kind of safety - and started talking. Inside the car the characters can feel safe, no one is going to listen to them, they can say what they want or need. Outside both of them were playing characters, drug dealers, in front of Tuco. Inside the car they are themselves. Heisenberg lets go of his sunglasses and puts on his regular glasses and becomes Walter White again. Jesse Pinkman lets go of the Captain Cook persona as well.

Image 2: Scene from the episode “737”



Source: Netflix.

During this scene it becomes visible that there is some sort of shock (or even tension), as expressed on the face of the characters, there and the characters are trying to recover from it. Walt then takes a deep breath and starts talking loudly to himself doing some math.

White calculates the cost of living for his family for the next ten years, which signals his rational, scientific behavior and rationale, but at the same time, his

supposedly altruistic side, or even his animal sense of being the provider, confirming somehow his superiority as a man who provides for his family. He takes inflation into consideration, mortgage of the house and college expenses, finds the number 737 thousand dollars quoted in the episode title (737) and tells Jesse that that is all he needs. In summary: eleven more weeks working for Tuco, which is something that scares him but he is willing to do it for the sake of his family.

These are Walter's means to an end, because at this point that is all he cares about: leaving this world and leaving something behind for those that he loves.

4.3 SCENE 3: SEASON 3, EPISODE NUMBER 5 “But”

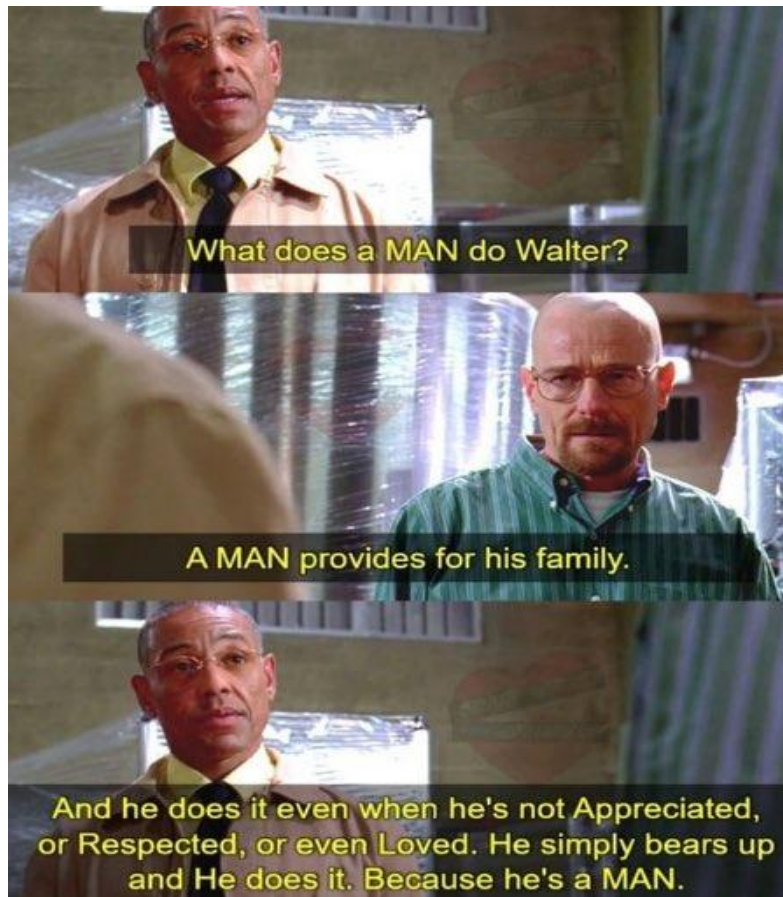
At this point, Walter White, a man who was diagnosed with lung cancer, now faces a crossroads. He decided to start making crystal Methamphetamine in order to save some money for his family to live well after his inevitable departure. However, things take a turn.

After making the most profitable deal of his life, ten times more than the one he did with “Tuco” earlier in the series, he is now stuck. At least that is what he feels. His wife Skyler found out his secret and is blackmailing him over not going to the police if he stays away from his kids. That is the complete opposite of what Walter wants. He started this whole operation for his family. To make amends with Skylar, he decides to leave the drug business even though he fails to convince her of his cause.

The man responsible for his last deal is called Gustavo Fring (Giancarlo Esposito), who now wants to keep the Heisenberg meth being produced. In this scene, through a lot of effort, he manages to lure White into a place that, he says, is going to be the new lab for Walter. The intention here is as clear as light: he wants to seduce Walter into working for him. This laboratory is equipped with the most advanced technology and machines that a man can buy: top tier air flow system and chemical gadgets that a high school chemistry teacher would only dream of using. Walter is charmed by the view, he really is, but not quite enough.

He says that he made many bad decisions in the past, and he is not about to make another one. When confronted by Gus as to the reason behind these “decisions”, he answers: “For the good of my family”. Which is replied by Gus with: “Then, they weren’t bad decisions.” Fring says that “A man provides for his family, even when he is not appreciated. That’s his job, that’s what a man should do.”

Image 3: Scene from the episode "But"



Source: <https://twitter.com/4eo/status/1615882125869195266>

Walter is at the crossroads between what he loves to do and the tenuous morality of right and wrong between being a criminal and supporting his family, or playing by the rules. Following the law as he always did, living his miserable life that clearly did not satisfy him while he slowly dies of cancer, with nothing left but his skills now see a clear path.

By touching Walt's ego and pride, and fabricating an excuse for his actions that he already believed in, Gus manages to convince Walter that he is doing what he is supposed to do. Even though that is not true, especially later on, when he proudly tells Jesse he is back in the business because he is the man for the job. In the end, the spectators start to realize that the whole project is not really about the well-being of his loved ones: it is all about his ego and pride.

4.4 SCENE 4: SEASON 4, EPISODE NUMBER 6 “Cornered”

The beginning of season 4 was an intriguing one, because it started from a massive cliffhanger at the end of season 3 with Jesse Pinkman (played by Aaron Paul) shooting Gale Boetticher (David Costabile), another chemist and lab partner of Walt. His death was needed in order to save Walter's life, but the spectators only see what really happened at the beginning of the first episode.

Eventually, the investigation of this murder reaches Hank Schrader (Dean Norris), Walter White's DEA brother-in-law, who, in the current state of the plot, is unable to move, due to a prior shootout earlier in season 3. That is the very reason he has handed in the papers, he is not working and he is feeling mostly unwell, psychologically and physically.

This is the scenario when Walter offers Hank some help with the case he is currently working on, and shares top secret information with the very criminal he is after. Sometime later, Hank shares he is no longer interested in chasing who killed Gale, since he believes Boetticher was the great mastermind that goes by the name Heisenberg.

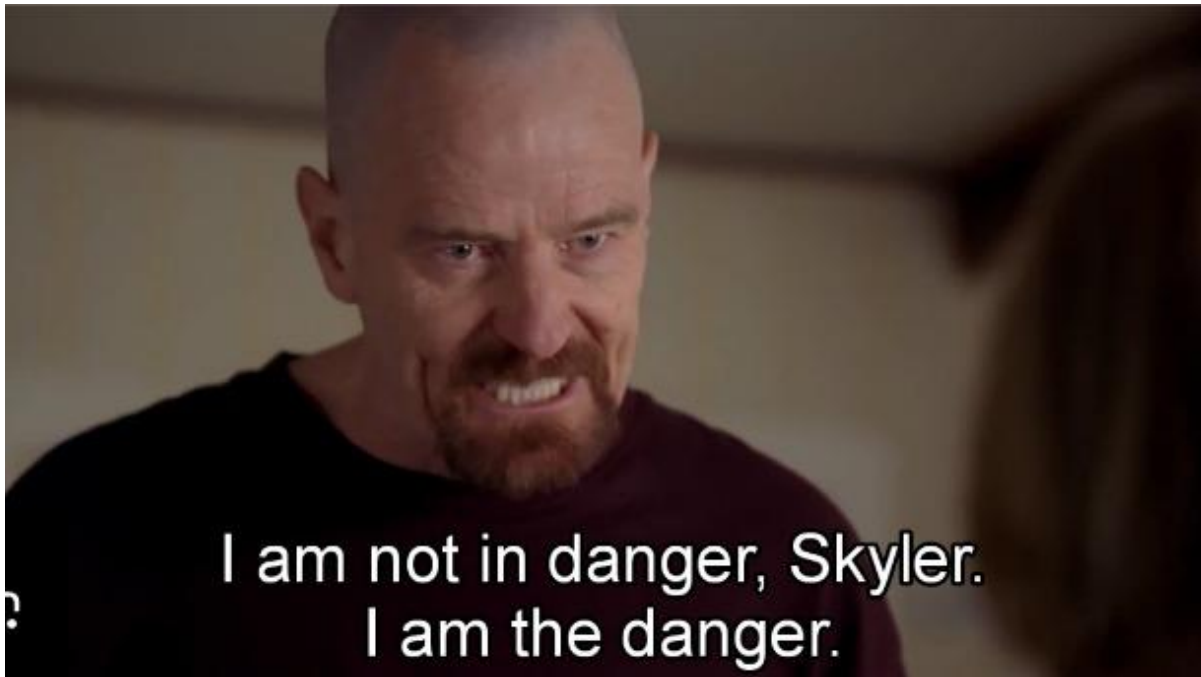
Furthermore, the narrative keeps going with Hank even praising the man, paying compliments on the geniality behind that mind and what good could have come from that had this criminal mind been used for other purposes. Walt, who at this point is already half drunk, starts to make expressions of discontent, to the point where he has to chime in. Walt's ego and pride never leave the show: it is an omnipresent aspect of his personality as a character, and it is somehow highlighted here. Walt says that Gale's work was mediocre at best, and it was only a matter of a cheap copy from the real mastermind behind it. He even says out loud that the genius Hank was after could still be out there, while drinking a glass of wine in content.

Walter is said during the entirety of the show to be a genius in many areas, not only chemistry. A guy like him, with so many skills and pride, needs to be recognized for what he is. He needs to be the man. It is extremely painful to him just the idea of someone else taking credit for what he accomplished. He is not in immediate danger of dying anymore and he does not need more money. He is after something else, a rightful place as a man who has done impressive deeds.

The scene from this episode takes all of that into consideration to justify Walt's actions. He is confronted by Skyler the very next day, regarding his actions the previous night. She says that it was impossible for her not to think about what Walter was trying to do, by encouraging Hank to keep looking for him. From a logical point of view, it did not make sense, unless Walt wanted to get caught. The reasoning goes on until she realizes that he is in danger, the whole White family might be for that matter. She fears that, like the other chemist worker, he might face the same fate. Walter, who is just an egotist prideful man, finds all that very hard to believe, and does not give her too much credit. However, she kept pushing it, and the way she speaks makes Walter feel less of a man, which is something unacceptable for someone like him.

The scene peaks with Walter not being able to take any more of that and exploding, not being able to restrain himself from the terrifying things he wanted to say. We can observe that through his facial expression, and mainly in his look - at this time, for instance, he is not wearing his glasses. In most scenes he wears glasses, but at this point, he is not wearing them, thus leaving the spectator (and also the interlocutor in the scene, Skylar) with a clearer view of his eyes - there would be no lenses separating them. He hints that he is the one responsible for Gale's death. This is the moment Skyler sees Walter for the danger he really poses. She is left trembling in fear of that man who she no longer recognizes, while he goes to take a shower.

Image 4: scene from the episode "Cornered"



Source:

https://www.reddit.com/r/MemeTemplatesOfficial/comments/nlch96/breaking_bad_i_am_not_in_danger_skyler_i_am_the/

Once Walter comes back, she is not there anymore. She just left with her daughter, making plans to even leave the State of New Mexico.

4.5 SCENE 5: SEASON 5, EPISODE NUMBER 7 “Say My Name”

The last scene of this analysis is the one that gives the title for this paper. To understand it in full, it is necessary to recap all what this character Walter White has been through up to this point. The man who worked his entire life for others is finally his own boss. White, Jesse Pinkman and a man who used to work for Gustavo Fring, Michael Ehrmantraut (Jonathan Banks), are now partners in a crime society of production and distribution of methamphetamine. They have a quite considerable stock of supplements to keep producing their product for a long time, however that is not going to be a possibility.

The DEA took a personal interest in Mike's activities and are watching his actions thoroughly; therefore, Mike decides to leave the business, which after communicating the decision, Jesse decides to go on the same path. They are going to sell their share of supplies for much less of their value. Walter, who is not fine with this decision, is asked by Jesse if they are in the “meth or the money” business. Later on, the next day, Jesse is still trying to convince Mr. White to sell, since the buyer is interested not only in the product, but in the whole market by eliminating competition. Pinkman even brings up the amount of money White needed, the 737 thousand dollars (as referred earlier in a previous episode). At this point, Walter explains to Jesse his mistakes in the past, when he sold his share of the Gray Matter company for 5 thousand which is now worth over 2 billion dollars, and then answering Jesse: “I am in the empire business⁴”.

It is crystal clear to the audience that, at this point, Walter White is not a desperate dying man anymore. He has a silver lining, and it is a good one for him. He is doing what he loves, and he is good at it. He is not going to stop for anything. We again see the ego and the pride of the man who not only thinks he is the best in the world in his profession but is also recognized by anyone who ever heard about his name. Such a scenario leads to the scene itself, where Walter convinces Mike and Jesse, he has a better plan. Reaching out to the buyer in the desert, the man is not so thrilled about White's proposition, even making threats of killing everybody there and then. The voice of this man is quite loud, and he stares into Walter's eye during most

⁴ Available at: <https://genius.com/Breaking-bad-say-my-name-script-annotated> Accessed on: 16 Nov. 2023.

of the conversation, only leaving eye contact to confirm with Mike if what Walt is saying is indeed true.

At the climax of the scene, the guy who had enough of this asks who is the person he is talking to, not acknowledging that Walter is anything worth his time, which Walter replies with his most famous phrase: "Say my name⁵". Eventually the man realizes who he is talking to, and says "Heisenberg⁶". During this last exchange the expression on the man's face starts to close up: he who was in the dominance of the entirety of the exchange, or at least he thought he was, now realizes the situation has changed. Once he acknowledges the person in front of him, he makes a sad expression, admitting he lost, and with a much lower tone says the name Heisenberg. Only to follow into submission of his will.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Ibidem.

Image 5: Scene from the episode "Say my name"



Source: <https://www.pinterest.pt/pin/569564684131123002/>

This whole interaction is the apex of what a man can become. A dying man facing death and bankruptcy somehow manages to become the emperor of a million-dollar drug business with only his mind and his will. Walter White is far from being a good man when the story reaches this stage, and yet there are still those who cheer for him. Why? The reason is because of the intimacy, the familiarization with a character the viewership has seen growing and being through so much. The audience knows what Walter went through to get where he is now.

The bonding with a character surpasses the bad conduct that he might display

even to the point of hating but admiring him. Nevertheless, what sometimes is missed is how this season 5 Heisenberg is not Walter White from season 1. He changed, and a great deal; the development of the character makes him a completely different person. Still, the resemblance is there.

The show only happens on television, but we can identify that a character is composed of words in a book, and in a show, it would not be so different. Sometimes we can understand a great deal from a character just by looking at him or the scene itself, without anybody saying any word whatsoever. Although sometimes there are some elements that are difficult to interpret only with expressions, those need words, sometimes we even have monologues. Walt often does that to himself, mostly in his car, where he does not have to cover from nobody.

The same effect happens when we are watching the last season of "Breaking Bad". The story went on for the better part of 2 years. Bryan Cranston, even though with some makeup, did not change that much, but his character did. Sometimes the show does not even make evidential changes in the character, even though he or she went through a massive transformation.

Those changes however are not invisible, and they exist. They are visible to a keen eye through their actions, through their facial expressions in certain moments. And that is a key concept when comparing an adaptation of a narrative from the live television and from a book.

The events in people's lives shape who they are, and that also applies to Walter White. As part of the audience, we just could see how much a person can change in such a short amount of time. The man who was fighting to survive now seeks out something entirely different, by doing similar actions, with extremely different purposes.

5 FINAL REMARKS

This work presented a brief analysis of the character Walter White, the protagonist of the famous TV series “Breaking Bad” that aired in the first decade of the 21st century in the United States (and later also in Brazil), as seen in five selected scenes (one from each season of the show).

Each one of the selected scenes marks a timeline into Walter White’s life and transformation. This transformation happens every time the character faces a crossroad and has to make a decision. In Walt’s case, it is noticeable that every step of the way he chose the worst option, or at least, the most criminal one (depending on how one sees those morally ambiguous choices). Is it ok to take a life to protect your own? Is it ok to kill someone else to protect somebody else? That would arguably be irrelevant here. The fact is: Walter White does all those things. It changes him into the persona of the last season.

The transition from a desperate man in season 1 happened because of his pride, who would not stand being “helped” by someone else. He needed to be the man. Therefore, in season 2 he is doing criminal activities to reach his goals, “Means to an End” as said by himself quoting Machiavelli in *The Prince* (1513).

In season 3 he no longer needs money, he has enough. However, somehow, he got played into keeping his criminal activities in order to “provide for his family.” Yet another lies of Walt’s playbook to not leave what is making him happy.

The scene from season 4 is the manifestation of White’s ego in a nutshell. He searched his whole life for something to make him great. To make him feel like he is the man. Someone on the same level as Elliot, and he finally did. He is an important piece in an interstate drug business, but that is not enough: he needs recognition, he needs to dominate, since he is addicted to power and has had enough of excusing his actions.

The last scene shows the realization of what he became, what he really wanted. He boldly can compare himself to Coca Cola, as the most famous Cola brand in the world, because that is the level he is at now. He truly believes people should know him by now, and they do. The attitude changes drastically to those around him specially in this scene at the moment they realize who they are talking to. Something that Skyler failed to acknowledge in earlier seasons. Nevertheless, he got what he wanted. He got respect for his abilities and his mind.

The symbolism in *Walter White* is widely known throughout the series. In Mieke Bal's *Narratology* (1999), she mentions how important it is for not only the character to be developed, but also the audience as the story goes. As the characters evolve in the narrative, the audience gets more mature too. They start with only a narrow understanding of the plot, only to pick up the pieces in the end. Vince Gilligan does that all the time in his shows. Showing something out of context, with no immediate meaning, until you finally see what that was supposed to be doing. Always foreshadowing something that is about to happen.

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