

Breaking Bad

reviewed by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [October 3, 2012](#) issue



In the second episode of season five of AMC's hit television series *Breaking Bad*, Walter White, the show's protagonist (played by Bryan Cranston), engineers a complicated ruse to convince Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul), his partner in crime—they cook and sell methamphetamine together—that he was not responsible for poisoning the son of Jesse's girlfriend. But Walt did poison the boy in a calculated move to trick Jesse into turning against the area drug lord and their boss in an underground meth super lab. When Jesse is fully convinced of Walt's innocence (the ruse is too complicated to explain here, but it involves a ricin-laden cigarette hidden in a robotic vacuum), he breaks down in sobs, horrified that he had previously threatened to shoot Walt. Walt strokes Jesse's shoulders in a comforting, paternal way and tells him all is forgiven.

If this all sounds a bit complicated, it is. And not just in terms of the suspenseful plot twists involved in any good crime drama. Most complicated of all is the way the viewer is taken into the moral ambiguities of the show. As I watched Walt manipulate Jesse's emotions and lie through his teeth about poisoning a child as part of his overall plan to murder a rival, I felt the thrill of Walt's virtuosic rise to the top of the food chain, his masterful orchestration of people and events to his own ends, even as I gasped, "I can't believe he's getting away with it." Each time Walt gets away with it ("it" is deceit, manipulation, physical violence, intimidation and murder), I can't help cheering him on, while also shuddering at his depravity and my own emotional complicity in it.

This conflicted moral and emotional relationship to Walt is all the more pronounced because he didn't used to be so bad. When the series starts, Walt is a middle-aged high school chemistry teacher who, when diagnosed with advanced lung cancer, stakes a desperate gamble on cooking methamphetamine with a drug-dealing former student to make money for his family before he dies. Before they have barely begun their enterprise, Walt and Jesse are plunged into the violence their new trade demands, and during the first season we watch Walt wrestle with the consequences of his actions. We've already given Walt our sympathies before we realize that he is consciously choosing to transform himself from a law-abiding, humble, conscientious man to a power-hungry, pride-driven, stop-at-nothing drug lord.

The show's creator, Vince Gilligan, has said in numerous interviews that this moral bait-and-switch is the point of the whole series: exploring what it means to fundamentally change a character throughout the arc of a series.

Many critics have drawn comparisons between Walter White and Tony Soprano, the first antihero in the television renaissance that chronicles the gritty realities of American life (*The Wire* and *Mad Men* often join *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* as exemplars of this type). Both series and the antiheroes who anchor them are concerned with understanding the moral underpinnings of our individual motivations and our common life with a seriousness that is lacking from most other public conversations, and both do so by convincing the viewer to sympathize with a morally reprehensible character.

The difference between Tony and Walt is that we know Tony is a bad guy from the minute we meet him. We are lulled into liking him and even to hoping he might be capable of his own conversion. *The Sopranos* pulls the rug out from under these hopes by the end of the series, and the faithful viewer is left wondering, much like Tony's therapist, if we weren't suckers all along.

We aren't so much suckers in our sympathy for Walt as paralyzed friends who can't quite believe a man we cared for could change so quickly or so thoroughly. For five seasons we watch Walt make choices, small and large, that fundamentally alter his moral disposition. Watching Walt break bad is like reading a Flannery O'Connor story that runs off the rails: he is offered moment after moment of grace (usually in the form of a way out of the drug business), and each time he stares it squarely in the face and turns away. In each choice we, as viewers, are offered the chance to reflect on the small ways the moral life is built, sustained and compromised.

Christians have a long tradition of reading the lives of the saints in a similar process of moral discernment. In the saints' witness, however, the story runs the other way: the saints often start as the worst of sinners, and the dramatic turning point is their salvation by grace. The assumption in these stories is that all of us are as sinful (in deed or capacity), and we can take succor in God's grace and learn practices of virtue by watching saints struggle along the path to conversion and sanctification. These stories provide a practice ground for moral discernment, in which we learn to read the signs and interpret the moves of the Christian life.

Of course, this practice is not so popular even among Christians these days, and the premise of sin and grace that gives these stories their coherence is no longer a shared assumption of public life. If anything, the common cultural assumption is that we all start out more or less pretty good, despite rather frequent appearances to the contrary. It should not be that surprising, then, that the stories we might need now are ones that chronicle the slippery slope by which pride, greed and anger undo the self and its relationships.

Maybe this is what makes the moral roller coaster of watching *Breaking Bad* so compelling: it gives us a broader cultural story through which to learn and practice moral discernment as we gasp and squirm at Walt's decline.