

In the 2008 Vince Gilligan crime drama 'Breaking Bad', mild-mannered chemistry teacher Walter White finds himself in the midst of an existential crisis upon discovering that he is afflicted with inoperable lung cancer, and has just two years left to live.

Concerned for the future of his wife Skyler and his disabled son Walter Jr., and knowing that his time is running out, Walt hatches a plan to use his expert knowledge of chemistry to produce and sell methamphetamine for profit, recruiting his former student Jesse Pinkman, a talented underachiever, into his scheme.

Initially out of his depth, Walt begins to thrive in this ruthless new world, quickly rising to the status of a feared drug kingpin under the alter ego 'Heisenberg', all the while concealing his true identity from his family, including his brother-in-law Hank Schrader, a DEA agent committed to apprehending the enigmatic new crime lord.

Drawn into conflict with rival drug cartels, hunted by the law and juggling his secret life with his new responsibilities as a father to a baby girl, Walt is forced into an escalating campaign of violence and destruction, as he fights desperately to cling to his newfound power and expand his growing criminal empire.

However, in pursuit of his goals, Walt must transgress his own moral limits and slowly but surely, he begins to lose himself, the love of his family, and the friendship of his partner in crime, Jesse - now wracked with guilt over the gravity of their deeds.

Filling the power-vacuum left by the assassination of his erstwhile employer, drug baron Gustavo Fring, Walt establishes himself as the most powerful kingpin in Albuquerque, heading a massive meth manufacturing and distribution operation.

When he suddenly retires to protect his family however, he unwittingly sets the stage for a sequence of events that will result in his drug empire falling into the hands of a ruthless gang of white supremacists. In the story's closing chapters, Walter's finally unmasked as Heisenberg after Hank, in a chance encounter, discovers incriminating evidence in the White's family home.

When Hank is killed and Jesse captured by the white supremacists, Walter's forced into hiding in the forests of New Hampshire. Months later, on returning to Albuquerque, he commits to destroying the Empire he had once built. After tying up some loose ends and trying to make peace with his wife and son, Walt heads to the white supremacist compound for a final confrontation, where he slaughters them in a surprise attack. Freeing Jesse from his captivity, and staying behind as he flees from the approaching police, Walt reminisces on his journey before succumbing to wounds he sustained in the battle, finally dying contentedly on the laboratory floor.

The symbolic subtext of the story is simple: Walter White, as his name bluntly suggests, is a metaphor for the White Man. The White Man, we are told, is dying - symbolized by Walt's terminal lung cancer. More, he finds himself a racial stranger in the world he once knew, reflected in the white family's address on Negra Arroyo - or Blackstream Avenue - the symbolic juxtaposition that hints at American demographic trends: as the White family are swept along by a black stream, rendered passive and domesticated and reduced to a life of servitude, Walt can do nothing but wait for the end. His future - the White Man's future - seems hopelessly bleak.

Faced with this inevitable decline and death, Walt lashes out at the world around him, rejecting the confines of the Bourgeois morality that had shaped it, and for the first time choosing to harness his hitherto untapped creative power for his own gain. In order to effect this transformation, he becomes Heisenberg, a second self that manifests his forbidden desire for power.

In light of Walt's obvious role as a symbolic representation of the modern White man, it does not take much reflection to grasp that his quest for power is a thinly veiled metaphor for contemporary America's fear of the dangers supposedly posed by white supremacism. And it is this understanding alone that allows us to grasp Breaking Bad's symbols and apprehend its true subversive meaning.

One of the first hints of this symbolic subtext is given during a pivotal scene early in the story, after Jesse first discovers that Walt is dying.

Jesse: *"I get it now! That's why you're doing all this! You want to make some cash for your people before you check out."*

Superficially, a discussion about Walt's struggles to provide for his family, a specific choice of language makes its metaphorical significance obvious: Walter White, the White Man, is driven by the desire to secure a future for his people. This aspiration will serve as the Catalyst for his downfall, and will lead him along a path of evil and corruption that will cost him everything, including the very family he had strove to protect.

In another seemingly inconsequential early scene, framed as a moment of comic relief, Jesse likens Walt to Hitler. Easily dismissed as a throwaway gag, this impression is quickly overruled by the recurring thematic references to Nazism, that will go on to become a central part of the unfolding story.

Notably, Walt's drug kingpin alter ego is named for the famous German physicist Werner Heisenberg, the father of the Nazi nuclear program. When he first manifests this new identity, Walt shaves his head, in an attempt on the part of the show's creators to evoke aesthetic associations with the skinhead subculture. In the show's final season, the story's ultimate villains are revealed as a group of neo-Nazis, and Walt's redemption only comes to sacrificing himself in order to destroy them.

This racial subtext underpins the entire narrative. Early in the story, the kindly Native American school janitor, Hugo, who will later take the fall for Walt's crimes, cleans up Walt's vomit, offering him a stick of gum to freshen his breath; subtle social commentary, implying that non-Whites in America clean up after the White Man's mess. The same theme is more explicitly reiterated in a later episode, when Walt coerces three Honduran immigrant women into cleaning his meth lab, resulting in their deportations. Moreover, Walt's drug empire is explicitly born on the Indian Reservation, where he first begins cooking methamphetamine, indicating that this empire is a coded metaphor for America itself - a country built by White men on what was once Indian land. As if to leave us without any doubt, in the final season Walt buries his ill-gotten gains on the same Indian Reservation, before his fortune is seized by the White supremacists who have wrested control of his empire.

Understanding the central metaphor empowers us to make a number of critical observations, concerning the real world connotations of another of Breaking Bad's primary narrative threads.

Over the course of the story, we learn that, as a young man, Walt has co-founded a scientific research company named Grey Matter Technologies with his Jewish friend and associate, Elliot Schwartz. While working on a research project for the company, he entered into a romantic relationship with his lab assistant, Gretchen, also of Jewish origins. However, plagued by feelings of inferiority due to the social status and wealth of Gretchen's prestigious family, Walt broke off their relationship and left Grey Matter, selling his stake in the company to Elliott for just five thousand dollars.

Following his departure, Elliot and Gretchen would marry and would proceed as co-owners of Grey Matter to become multi-billionaires, and to win a Nobel Prize for their work in the field of chemistry. Walt, meanwhile, teaches disinterested teenagers at a city highschool, struggles with a second job at a car wash under an immigrant boss and cannot even pay for his own medical bills. Bitter over his failures and envious of his former friend's success, he blames the Schwartzes for stealing his work and driving him out of the company that he built, thereby robbing him of the wealth and acclaim that should be rightfully his.

The underlying subtext is hardly subtle. Walt is the White Man, the Schwartzes are the Jews, and Grey Matter is a metaphor for the legacy and material wealth of Western Civilization. In a narrative echoing the biblical tale of Jacob and Esau, the white Man, we are told, willingly sold his birthright and his stake in the civilization he created. His dispossession from it is therefore well deserved. Schwartz, incidentally, is an Ashkenazi Jewish surname meaning 'black', implying a fundamental opposition to the whiteness represented by Walter White.

But Walt is not the only symbolic stand-in for the White man. Jesse Pinkman fulfills the same narrative role. However, while Walt is a tragic villain who finds redemption only in death, Jesse is a troubled hero who acts as the viewer's conscience. Becoming the story's moral center over the course of the series, the conflict between these two wildly different protagonists serves as the show's central dramatic dynamic.

In one scene that serves as a microcosm of his entire narrative arc, a guilt-ridden Jesse, despondent over his crimes, gives ten thousand dollars to a homeless black man. With tears in his eyes, he then drives to a poor neighborhood, throwing bundles of cash at passing houses, desperate to rid himself of his newfound wealth. Jesse, the 'good' White Man, is crippled by guilt and demonstrates his virtue by giving all of his money to non-Whites. Walt, the 'bad' White man, is filled with pride and selfishly hoards his share for his family, keeping it stacked in a huge pile in a private storage container.

These juxtapositions between the two protagonists occur throughout the story. While Jesse's interracial courtship of the Mexican single mother and recovered addict, Andrea, is redemptive, promising not only to liberate him from his addictions but to provide him with a new sense of purpose as her son's surrogate father, Walt's relationship with the blonde, blue-eyed Skyler, is fraught with hatred and resentment. This disharmony is symbolized by the defective son that their Union produces, crippled by cerebral palsy.

One episode in particular however stands out above the others in its symbolic significance, encapsulating the central thrust of the narrative as a whole. In a storyline with subtle shades of Herman Melville's 'Moby Dick', Walt and Jesse hunt an elusive fly that Walt fears will contaminate his laboratory. Frustrated by his inability to kill the creature, Walt muses on his mortality, reflecting that he has lived too long and that his continued existence has brought suffering to himself and to others. Finally, while Walt sleeps, Jesse is able to swat the fly.

The hidden meaning of this bizarre digression is simple: Walt is the fly and he is hunting himself. He is the contaminant polluting the world with his desire to cling to life, power and control. He is, in some sense, already dead. Flies, after all, flock to corpses. The connotations of this symbolism should be obvious in light of *Breaking Bad*'s prevailing racial metaphor. Incidentally, this episode was directed by Rian Johnson, whose anti-White credentials are well known, and are perhaps best reflected in his 2017 film *'Knives Out'*, which shares many of the same themes.

Put simply then, the purpose of *Breaking Bad* is to convince the White man to give up the fight against his own decline and death, and instead to passively accept it, because it is inevitable. This death, we are told in the very first episode, is part of an inescapable cycle of solution and dissolution, growth and decay. To oppose it would be to oppose the course of Nature.

And this, they insist, was Walter White's original sin: he took from the Tree of Life to eat and live forever. But in order to convince us to abandon our struggle, it was first necessary that we'd be lured into undertaking Walter White's journey alongside him; to stand in his shoes and trace his path. We had to endure the pain of his powerlessness, the sting of his humiliations and the thrill of his triumphs. We had to feel the grief of his losses, his hate and his anger, his love and his fear. Then, once we identified with him fully, we were to know his regret and to see the futility of his actions. Finally, we would undergo the same moral transformation that led him to sacrifice himself, and to destroy everything he had built, and submit ourselves willingly to the same false redemption that claimed him. Walking alongside this false icon at every step, we would learn to topple ourselves.

*Breaking bad*, however, is not unique. It is only the culmination and perfection of a story that has been percolating in the Western consciousness for decades, perhaps centuries. A metaphor for the choice we as a people must make between a life of struggle and conflict or an easy death with unsullied hands. To be or not to be - the particulars may differ, even wildly so, but the essence is always the same. The White Man, playing the part of Milton's Lucifer, lashes out bitterly at a world that has reduced him to servility, seeking to reclaim power over his own destiny, finally seeing the meaninglessness of his fight, the impossibility of victory, and the destruction his actions have wrought, he surrenders to fate and embraces death.

But there is another famed literary work that may provide insight into *Breaking Bad*'s true significance: the aforementioned Herman Melville novel *'Moby Dick'*. The White Man, then, is America's White Whale, and he hunts himself. His poisoned consciousness striving to slay the primal, untamed life force within, the inner Heisenberg. Pitted against himself, he despises this uninhibited inner nature, because it does not conform to the false moral system that has been imposed upon him, and by which he judges and condemns his own being. This is why we are driven to subjugate ourselves to systems that chain us, moral precepts that harm us, and drugs that weaken us. It is why we mutilate ourselves through endless self-critique and why we relentlessly scrutinize our own thoughts and deeds. It is why we are now compelled to submit to the synthetic gods that, through AI, we are in the process of creating. And like Ahab and his *Pequod*, we recruit peoples from all corners of the Earth to assist us in our task. This hunt to slay the Great White Beast has become the meta-narrative of the Modern Age, and it is the secret tie that binds its many myths together. We hunt ourselves because the conflict between our primal inner being with its forbidden strength and the servile creature we have been trained to become is irreconcilable. And one force must inevitably triumph above the other. Either the moral system we have accepted dies, or we die. There is no middle ground. This is the choice that lies before us.

Breaking Bad then, is the product of fear. The fear that European Man, dispossessed of his birthright and robbed of his future, has nothing left to lose. The fear that he will cast off the chains of the false moral code that is slowly killing him. The fear that the primal force within him that once conquered the world might still, somewhere, be stirring.