



“I’M IN THE EMPIRE BUSINESS” GREED, HUBRIS, AND OBSESSION IN *BREAKING BAD* AND *THE TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE*

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A highly intertextual series, *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) references numerous films, one notable one being *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948). The reference to *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* occurs in the episode “Buyout” and consists of an extended scene of dialogue that borrows heavily from John Huston’s film. In *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* Humphrey Bogart’s character Dobbs successfully procures gold with the help of a prospector named Howard (Walter Huston) and a partner named Curtin (Tim Holt), but paranoia and resentment settles in, and the isolation of the mountain becomes the perfect place for murder. Despite striking it rich with a profitable amount of gold, Dobbs grows increasingly suspicious of his partners and any potential interlopers. This insatiable desire to hoard as much gold as possible begins a downward spiral into mania and violence, in particular when an outsider named James Cody (Bruce Bennett) follows Curtin from town and attempts to wrangle his way into the group by offering the other three an ultimatum:

As I see it, you fellows have three things: kill me, run me off, or take me in with you as a partner. Let’s consider the first. Another guy might show up tomorrow, or maybe a dozen guys. If you start bumping guys off, how far are you prepared to go with it? Ask yourselves that. Also, don’t forget that the one actually to do the bumping off would forever be in the power of the other two. (1:00:50-1:01:12)

After the prospectors reject this option, Cody continues, “as for choice number two, if you chase me off I might very well inform on you,” which only inspires Howard to object by stating that they would chase him down later on as an incentive against collecting the substantial reward money Cody would gain (1:09:27). The prospectors can



only return to the first option: killing Cody and leaving him to die in the desert, unnoticed by the authorities. It is, at least as far as Howard, Curtin, and Dobbs are concerned, a fairly convincing argument that they should indeed eliminate Cody. Cody does attempt a weak protest, admitting “I don’t deny it, but let’s see what number three has to offer. If you take me in as a partner you don’t stand to lose anything. I will not ask to share in what you’ve made so far, only in the profits to come. Well, what do you say?” (1:101:42-1:101:48). In the end, all Cody has accomplished is to argue his way into being killed as the prospectors all decide to get rid of Cody. The act itself is interrupted by bandits, but morally, they have decided upon a violent course of action in order to protect their potential wealth.

This scene illustrates the ruthless nature of gold prospecting and how the blind pursuit of absolute wealth corrupts individuals. As Robert Emmett Ginna, Jr. argues, “Huston’s direction of the scene declares that each of the three seekers have committed murder in his heart” (Ginna 2002, 85). It is only because a group of Mexican bandits attack, leaving Cody fatally shot, that they are exempt from the guilt of committing the actual act. Janne Lahti echoes this point, adding that the film “showed how promising avenues for redemption and respectability could very easily lead to greed and disaster” (Lahti 2016, 341). In this regard, greed, paranoia, and the desire for gold are closely linked with masculinity and violence as a corruptive influence. For Dobbs this scene proves to be the emotional linchpin of the narrative and a point beyond redemption because, unlike Howard and Curtin (who finds a letter on Cody’s body about his peach orchard back home and vows to return the letter to Cody’s wife and child as a form of recompense), Dobbs refuses to allow himself to feel guilt and persists in his self-deception (1:14:40-18:20).

By using *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* Vince Gilligan is not only aligning Walt with Dobbs, thereby also morally aligning Walt with Dobbs’ descent into paranoia and greed, but he is also aligning the series with an ideological critique similar to that of the film. David Harvey in his book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* states the inevitable consequences of neoliberalism and wealth accumulation are the suppression of alternative forms of labor, appropriation of resources by a focused source of labor power, and the creation of a dispossessed class of citizens (Harvey 2007, 159). Read in this context, Walt’s brutal ascendancy to power is a natural outgrowth of capital accumulation. And as Harvey indicates, stepping outside the bounds of legality is permissible as long as it promotes the individual’s wealth, whether that is through the obsessive need to procure all the gold, as with Dobbs, or an excess of money through the production of an illicit substance, as with Walter White (Bryan Cranston). Indeed, it seems as though illicit or outright criminal activity is a response to the expanded freedoms afforded corporations and large industries within the neoliberal framework. *Breaking Bad* is connecting the roots of the American psyche with a colonialist expression of dominance and control, and connecting Walt with the Neo-Nazis provides an implicit



dimension of criticism levied at the willingness of capitalism to associate with fascist elements in society as long as the mandate of profit is being served.

A similar scene to the confrontation between Dobbs, Howard and Cody in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and also a narrative turning point occurs in the fifth season of *Breaking Bad*, in the episode “Buyout” (season 5, episode 8), a scene that also functions as a moral turning point for Jesse and signals to the audience Walt’s continued self-denial about the consequences of his actions. “Buyout” begins with an opening teaser where Walt, Todd, and enforcer Mike Ehrmantraut dispose of the evidence and dissolve the boy’s bike in an acid solution (season 5, episode 8). Afterwards Walt, Jesse, and Mike discuss Todd’s continued partnership in their drug outfit, which uses an exterminator company called Vamonos Pest as a front, in a scene which shares a similarity to the stranger’s proposition in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. Walt lays out the options:

It seems to me we have three options here and none of which are ideal. One, we fire Todd. I’m not a fan of this option seeing that he knows way too much about this business at this point. And we’d most likely have to pay him to keep quiet. And God only knows we’ve got enough of that going on. Two, we dispose of him. Which leaves us with option three; we keep him on the payroll. Put him back on tenting houses, setting up the lab and so forth. We keep him close, under our control. Now option three would be my choice. Shall we vote? (season 5, episode 8)

As the episode teaser for “Buyout” unfolds the quiet scene and minimal music focuses the viewer’s attention on the bleak and remorseful expressions on the faces of Walt and Mike. As Walt and Mike break down the boy’s bicycle in an acid solution Walt’s face takes on a notable expression of turmoil and conflict. Yet just prior to Walt laying out the options and just after Jesse makes his case on the basis that he has connections with the Neo-Nazis who could act as muscle for Walt (a case made as an apparent olive branch but with an undercurrent of an implied threat against Walt), Walt is already rationalizing the boy’s death: “Well, the boy had seen us. And no, it didn’t look like he knew what he was seeing. But what if he told somebody? What if he just mentioned it in passing?” Even after Walt felt the weight of his actions and is seen to be affected deeply by the guilt, it is only moments later that he compartmentalizes the guilt and begins pragmatically to place a value on the life of the boy, weighed against the profit he would make by continuing his drug operation and by generating connections with known gun dealers and Neo-Nazi associates.

The most direct correlation between the film and the episode is Cody’s proposition and Walt’s rationalization. Cody and Walt are similar in that they both attempt to use logic in a situation where logic and rationality has to compete against the irrationality of greed and desire, and as a result, they get in over their heads. William Graebner profiles the Cody character in a way that a viewer of *Breaking Bad* would recognize as



characteristic of Walt as well: “Cody combines science and logic. On the one hand, he claims to have the ability to locate gold by examining geological formations; on the other hand, he purports to know something about how human beings will resolve ethical dilemmas” (Graebner 2004, 35). This overconfidence and egotism is a trait shared by Cody and Walt. Cody’s arrogance does not take into account the insatiable nature of greed which supersedes the morality of the prospectors. For Walt, his arrogance does not take into account the randomness of a psychopath like Todd. Walt, much like Cody, and also much like Gus, suffers from overconfidence in his ability to outsmart his enemies. Walt believes in the supremacy of his own intellect to the point where he fails to take into account just how truly random the violence of the drug trade is, or does not care how violent it is, because despite his overconfidence in his mental abilities, Walt’s greed triumphs over everything, just as it does for Cody.

Walt and Cody share a sense of entitlement and believe their own suffering necessitates any moral wrangling needed to generate wealth. One difference between the two is that Walt survives longer and is able to build up enough of immunity to pain and suffering that he can recover more quickly than Cody. Even Walt’s appeal to Jesse in “Say My Name” is, as is typical of Walt, a mixture of honest confession and emotional manipulation: “What, am I gonna’ curl up in a ball in tears in front of you, or am I gonna lock myself in a room and get high to prove it to you? What happened to that boy was a tragedy and it tears me up inside” (season 5, episode 7). Accepting that Walt is honest about his feelings of guilt and regret over the boy’s death—and there is at least a grain of truth in his estimation of his feelings of regret—this equivocation to Jesse constitutes a rather quick recovery from trauma. Dobbs also offers up a very similar rationalization when he says at one point, after attempting to murder Curtin—who is left for dead by Dobbs but is only wounded—“Conscience. What a thing! If you believe you got a conscience, it’ll pester you to death. But if you don’t believe you got one, what could it do t’ya? Makes me sick, all this talking and fussing about nonsense” (1:39:18-1:39:14). For both Walt and Dobbs expressing regret over murder (or in Dobbs’ case, the intent to commit murder) is repressed and rationalized as an inconvenience in their goal. The main difference, however, is that Dobbs succumbs to a King Lear-like madness much sooner, whereas Walt more effectively represses his pangs of guilt; his psychological unraveling, while undeniable, is a more gradual process because Walt compartmentalizes them into the distinctly different personas: that of Walt, the family man, and Heisenberg, the cold and calculating drug kingpin.

In this way *Breaking Bad* also connects Walt to the logic of Cody (they even share the same familial impetus for their actions) as well as to that of Dobbs. Cody and Dobbs exist as the two poles of Walt’s personality: the rationalist who can think his way out of anything, whether that means avoiding seemingly impossible no-win scenarios or compartmentalizing guilt, as well as the Walt who has been thoroughly corrupted and, as such, is prone to fits of anger when his empire is threatened. This is a Walt who,



much like Dobbs has become increasingly greedy and paranoid that his fortune is simply not enough. Walt is exceptionally good at rationalizing his guilt when it comes to the consequences of others, but by mid-series, he has become so corroded by the pursuit of wealth and power that any criminal or immoral actions can be filed away in the deep recesses of his psyche. Where Jesse admits to himself and to others, “I’m the bad guy,” Walt in that same episode is already in the process of self-denial when he trots out justifications such as, “I’m not a criminal... this is not me... I’m a manufacturer, not a dealer” (season 3, episode 1). The Walt who began this criminal endeavor for the sake of his family, much like Cody embarking on his pursuit of wealth for the sake of his family back home at his peach orchard, has now fully emerged into the criminal identity of Heisenberg, a villain like Dobbs.

Neoliberalism and its damaging effects on society are encoded into the skeleton of the series: that of a middle aged man struggling with medical debt. Advocates of the neoliberal economic model, most famously Milton Friedman, who was a consultant for both Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, always proffer up the free market as some sort of magically self regulating system that somehow autocorrects itself as if by divine intervention. Friedman makes the claim: “Wherever the free market has been permitted to operate, wherever anything approaching equality of opportunity has existed, the ordinary man has been able to attain levels of living never dreamed of before” (Friedman and Rose 1980, 146). In Friedman’s assertion the deregulation of any government bureaucracies—health care, social security, fair employment practices, welfare, even vocational licenses such as medical doctors—confers upon the poor and rich alike an economic freedom that is commensurate with political freedom.

So Walt, starting the series as an “ordinary man,” much like Dobbs in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, should have no difficulties in prospering under a deregulated, free market economy without having to resort to acts of violence and brutality. However, as the series effectively illustrates, once stripped of the social support systems that would help pay for his cancer treatment, it becomes an insurmountable task for Walt to prosper until he does engage in duplicitous and criminal activities. By focusing on Walt’s transformation from affable chemistry teacher to drug kingpin, *Breaking Bad* is depicting just how untrustworthy a faith in the free market truly is. Walt begins the series with the best of intentions and as a victim of circumstances who only wanted to provide for his family, but once the barriers are removed he is consumed by greed and the allure of power. Walt’s moral center is degraded because there are no checks and balances to mitigate his violent actions. A similar narrative arc occurs with Dobbs, who begins as a beleaguered man who is exploited by a corrupt businessman named Barton MacLane (Pat McCormick) who backs out of paying Dobbs for his work on an oil rig. Once he discovers the gold, however, Dobbs’s moral center loosens and he becomes obsessed with accumulating as much as possible, whatever the cost.



The intertextual reference to *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* helps compel viewers to remove their sympathies from the series' protagonist, Walt. The final turning point in Walt's transformation into Heisenberg is somewhat ambiguous, but the intertextual reference to the John Huston film operates as a rubric for evaluating Walt's moral compass. In *Breaking Bad*, Walt, who does initially display authentic shock and disgust after Todd shoots the young boy, then rationalizes the action with the same logic exemplified by *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*'s Cody in order to maintain his criminal empire (season 5, episode 8). In *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* Dobbs ends up alone and is killed by a group of bandits, his gold left behind after being mistaken for bags of sand by the bandits. In *Breaking Bad* Walt, knowing that his cancer will overtake him soon, stages a last solo attack on the bandits who robbed him, the group of Neo-Nazis led by Uncle Jack. Much like Dobbs's treasure, the barrels of money stolen by the Neo-Nazis are never recovered. The similarity in trajectory and the scene in which the intertextual reference occurs can be interpreted as a moral signpost of when Walt goes beyond salvation.

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