

Moral Decline and Identity Evolution: Literary Exploration of Walter White (*Breaking Bad*) and Saul Goodman (*Better Call Saul*)

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Abstract

This study examines the moral decline and identity evolution of Walter White from *Breaking Bad* and Saul Goodman from *Better Call Saul* using a literary perspective. Through the frameworks of the tragic hero and picaresque archetypes, this analysis aims to show how the characters' internal conflicts, ambitions, and moral compromises cause them to become antiheroes. Saul's psychological challenges, dishonesty, and coping strategies exemplify his progression from Jimmy McGill, a well-intentioned but flawed lawyer, to the morally ambiguous figure of Saul Goodman. In contrast, Walter White's moral decline—from a disempowered teacher to ruthless drug lord—represents a significant breach of ethical boundaries. The findings offer a deeper understanding of how moral boundaries are reshaped in contemporary television narratives, highlighting the ambiguity of moral choices and the transformation of identity for viewers.

Keywords: *Modern Television, Antihero, moral descent, narrative technique*

1. Introduction

Television is a narrative device. Thousands of hours of stories are broadcast on television and cable every day, reaching our television sets and brains (Newman 2006). It is now widely accepted that the television narrative has undergone significant shift during the past 20 years or so (Đurić, 2015). The morally complex character has increasingly appeared in popular television and film, including *The Sopranos*, *Mr. Robot*, *Dexter*, *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, and *House* (Raney & Janicke, 2013, as cited in Daalmans, Hijmans, & Wester, 2017).

The early 21st century has reacted strongly to the golden age of television, defined by morally ambiguous characters grappling with existence in a post-9/11 world. Their desperate actions are often motivated by family, ego, success, and self-sabotage (Lyons, 2021). In the golden age of television, few characters have experienced such intricate moral and psychological journeys as Walter White and Saul Goodman. Both figures exemplify the narrative strategy of slow-burning transformation where viewers witness the

gradual moral decay and shifting personal identities. Walter White's descent into "Heisenberg" and Jimmy McGill's metamorphosis into Saul Goodman portray identity not as a fixed essence, but a construct shaped by circumstance, desire, and choice. In *Breaking Bad*, the protagonist Walter White's transformation from a sympathetic family man to a ruthless drug lord challenges viewers to question the boundaries between right and wrong, and whether good intentions can justify harmful actions. This moral ambiguity is a hallmark of *Breaking Bad*'s storytelling. Walter White from *Breaking Bad* and Jimmy McGill/Saul Goodman from *Better Call Saul* exemplify the gradual decline of ethics and the reconstruction of identity. This paper posits the case that Walter White's and Jimmy McGill's moral metamorphoses into Heisenberg and Saul Goodman, respectively, demonstrate how identity is a performative construct influenced by personal action, systemic forces, and moral disengagement.

2. Methods and Materials

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach, using close reading and thematic analysis to explore the moral and identity shifts of Walter White and Saul Goodman. Selected episodes from *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul* serve as the primary material, with attention given to character arcs, key dialogues, and scenes that reflect major turning points.

The analysis is guided by the literary concepts of the tragic and picaresque hero, helping to frame each character's transformation within a broader narrative tradition. Alongside the episodes, the research draws on critical essays, interviews, and media commentary to add context and support the interpretation.

3. Theoretical Frameworks

This study draws upon two major literary frameworks to analyze the moral decline and identity evolution of Walter White (*Breaking Bad*) and Saul Goodman (*Better Call Saul*): Aristotle's theory of the tragic hero and the picaresque hero tradition. These classical models provide insight into the psychological and ethical dimensions of the characters, allowing for a structured literary analysis within a television narrative.

3.1 Aristotle's Tragic Hero

Aristotle in his work *Poetics* outlines the key elements that define a tragic hero —

- A fatal flaw or error of judgment (hamartia)
- A reversal of fortune caused by the hero's error in judgment (peripeteia)
- A moment of recognition or self-awareness (anagnorisis)
- Ultimately a downfall that evokes catharsis — pity and fear in the audience.

These characters often navigate the challenges arising from their own flaws and circumstances, allowing audiences to empathize with their experiences. The journeys of tragic heroes reflect the nuanced nature of life and the complexities of the human condition, resonating deeply across diverse audiences. (Lee, 2025).

In this context, Walter White exemplifies the modern tragic hero. Walter's hamartia lies in his hubris and dormant desire for power and control. Initially motivated by the desire to provide for his family after a cancer diagnosis, he gradually descends into criminality, driven by ego and the thrill of power. The Peripeteia or (Reversal of Fortune) occurs when his empire collapses in season 5, ironically leading to the destruction of his family, moral disintegration, and eventual downfall. In the final episode (*Felina*), Walter experiences anagnorisis, admitting that he acted not for his family but for himself. The audience

undergoes catharsis as Walter's self-destruction emerges as both tragic and inevitable — a man undone by his own fatal choices.

3.2 Picaresque Hero

The concept of the picaresque hero is rooted in 16th-century Spanish literature, notably exemplified by the anonymous novel "Lazarillo de Tormes." This work serves as a significant reference point for understanding the characteristics and nuances of the picaresque narrative tradition. According to Friedman (1967), the typical picaro is an anti-heroic, lower-class person who uses cunning, deception, and opportunism to live in a corrupt society. In contemporary television, characters like Jimmy McGill from *Better Call Saul* exemplify modern picaresque figures. Saul Goodman's transformation is marked by a gradual series of ethically ambiguous choices and deliberate reinventions. His charm, manipulation of legal frameworks, and defiance of norms align him with the traits of a picaresque hero (Stewart, 2024).

4. Literature Review:

Both Walter White and Saul Goodman have received significant attention in scholarly discourse. Scholars have extensively examined Walter White's descent in *Breaking Bad* through the lens of Aristotelian tragedy, highlighting his hubris and moral disintegration (Mittell, 2015). In contrast, Saul Goodman's evolution in *Better Call Saul* has received comparatively less attention, often portrayed as comic relief or a legal trickster. Despite increasing interest in both characters, there remains a gap in the analysis of Walter White and Saul Goodman as distinct yet interconnected representations of moral decline. While their journeys have been examined, few studies have examined how identity formation and ethical transformation intersect across series. This article aims to fill that gap by exploring White's tragic descent and Saul's strategic path, focusing on how each character grapples with morality, power, and identity.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Walter White

5.1.1 From Everyman to Heisenberg

Walter White, the central character of the TV show *Breaking Bad*, is initially portrayed as a devoted family man—loyal to his pregnant wife, Skyler, and concerned about the future of his paraplegic teenage son, Walter Jr.,. His sense of responsibility and paternal duty is a central of his identity, shaping the moral justification he offers when he first turns to the criminal underworld. This decision, though presented as self-sacrifice, marks the beginning of a tragic trajectory—one that aligns closely with Aristotle's notion of the tragic hero. The classic fall from grace is poignantly illustrated through Walter's evolution from an overqualified but undervalued high school chemistry teacher to a formidable drug lord. According to Sepinwall (2013), Walter evokes empathy in viewers as the "identifiable suburban dad" with tremendous pressure. His initial motivation to secure his family's financial stability masks a more profound desire for power and respect. Walter's fatal flaw or hamartia lies in his hubris which fuels his quest for control and power. This shift from altruism to egotism illustrates a classic moral descent fueled by hubris, where each decision intensifies his detachment from ethics and accelerates the erosion of his former identity (Echart & García, 2015; Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2017).

Walter delivers one of the most definitive statements of his transformation into Heisenberg in the episode *Cornered* (*Breaking Bad*, Season 4, Episode 6):

"I am not in danger, Skyler. I am the danger. A guy opens his door and gets shot and you think that of me? No. I am the one who knocks!"

This chilling declaration marks not only the full emergence of Heisenberg but also the peripeteia—the turning point where Walter embraces his darker self, no longer acting out of fear but out of ego and assertion of power. The dialogue posits Walter as an embodiment of control, fear, and ego – a man who sees himself not as a protector but as a predator. The transformation come into full circle- his former self, capable of making morally and ethically sound decisions is replaced by vanity and inflated self -image.

5.1.2 Moral Justification and Self-Deceptions

Throughout the series, Walter rationalizes his actions by appealing to the need to provide for his family. However, his rationale is increasingly hollow. His self-deception — a feature of tragic heroes — masks his true motivations: pride, ego, and the desire to leave behind a legacy of power and genius. In the episode Felina, Walter finally experiences anagnorisis when confesses to his wife, Skyler:

"I did it because I liked it. I was good at it".

This moment is a revelation of the carefully constructed moral veil that Walter has hidden behind throughout the series. His prior insistence that he ventured into the illegal drug business to provide for his family is debunked, revealing his enduring ambition to build a legacy underpinned by power, mastery, and control. Walter's infamous dialogue from an earlier episode- 'Chemistry is the study of matter, but I prefer to see it as the study of change'-becomes a fitting metaphor of his evolution.

Casale (2020) argues that Walter White's descent from moral indifference to genuine malevolence is a gradual process that starts with pride and is driven by seemingly noble intentions. Bandura's (1999) theory of moral disengagement holds that people justify harmful activity by reframing them as morally acceptable. Walter does the same-rationalizing his actions as necessary sacrifices for his family. Yet over time, this justification grows increasingly tenuous, as his decisions appear driven more by pride and ambition than protection or necessity. In the episode *Ozymandias*, Walter's phone call to Skyler further demonstrates this strategic manipulation. His language is foul and demeaning—"You stupid bitch! How dare you? ... You never believed in me."—viewers later understand that he was orchestrating a verbal manipulation for the police to exonerate her (Gilligan, 2013). This deliberate act emphasizes the idea of moral self-deception by obscuring the distinction between moral sacrifice and performance. Walter White's journey, from Everyman to Heisenberg, mirrors the structure of Aristotelian tragedy: a noble man undone by his own flaws, whose fall evokes both fear and pity. His arc culminates not only in destruction but in self-awareness—fulfilling the tragic hero's function of moral reckoning and evoking catharsis in the viewer.

5.1.2.1 Key Moments of Moral Decline

The following pivotal scenes throughout *Breaking Bad* illustrate the progressive deterioration of Walter's morality:

- **The Killing of Krazy-8 (Season 1, Episode 3 - "...And the Bag's in the River")**
Walter's first kill marks the beginning of his irreversible transformation. Though this act of killing a human being antagonizes him, his justification is anchored more in self-preservation than necessity.

- **Letting Jane Die (Season 2, Episode 12 - "Phoenix")**
Walter choose to watch Jane choke to death although he could have saved her. This act, in particular, reveals his calculated cruelty. He argues that she was a potential threat to Jesse and their drug business.
- **Poisoning Brock (Season 4, Episode 13 - "Face Off")**
Perhaps one of his most morally reprehensible acts, Walter poisons a child to manipulate Jesse — showcasing his willingness to use innocent lives as pawns.
- **The "I did it for me" Confession (Season 5, Episode 16 - "Felina")**
This moment of anagnorisis reveals that his earlier moral justification was a façade all along. What he sought was self-exaltation.

5. 2 Saul Goodman

5.2.1 Jimmy McGill to Saul Goodman to Gene Takavic

5.2.1.1 Jimmy McGill

Lyons (2021) contends that Jimmy McGill, later known as Saul Goodman in *Better Call Saul*, paints a perceptive yet dismal picture of the ethical challenges and personal choices faced in a convoluted system. Jimmy's development in *Better Call Saul* displays a complex transformation, evolving from an ambitious underdog with a troubled past to an ethically ambiguous legal trickster, and ultimately to a hollow figure of anonymity. Karunakaran (2024) notes, Jimmy begin the series as a sincere but morally ambiguous figure, attempting to establish a more respectable legal career while working as a lowly public defender. He carries with him a past full of shady dealings, where deception and bending the law had almost become the norm (Jimmy McGill's Tragic Flaw, n.d.). The groundwork for his eventual transformation is already visible in these early traits. According to Factual America (n.d.), at the core of Jimmy's transformation lies the persistent disapproval from his elder brother, Chuck McGill, who never quite trusted Jimmy's capacity to succeed in a legitimate way. He thought of Jimmy as nothing more than a con man he once was. He often downplayed his efforts, dismissing his accomplishments as manipulation.

5.2.1.2 Transition to Saul Goodman

The transition from Jimmy McGill to Saul Goodman marks a pivotal moment in the character's moral deterioration and identity fragmentation. Saul is not merely an alias; he is a meticulously constructed persona — one that is flashy, manipulative, and overtly performative. This development aligns closely with the traits of the picaresque hero: an outsider who survives by navigating social corruption with cunning and spectacle. Steward (2024) and Thakuri (2024) suggest, this shift of persona happens over time, not abruptly. According to *The Dual Lives of Jimmy McGill in Better Call Saul* (n.d.), Jimmy adopts a flamboyant persona, complete with flashy clothing and over-the-top marketing strategies, while employing ethically questionable tactics. He does this primarily to appeal to and attract a criminal clientele, positioning himself as the go-to lawyer for those on the wrong side of the law. Much like traditional picaros, Saul uses his wit and showmanship to gain leverage in a system that has otherwise excluded him. This transformation functions as a coping mechanism in response to institutional rejection and personal disillusionment. In *Magic Man (Better Call Saul, Season 05, Episode 01)*, and *Cobbler (Better Call Saul, Season 02 Episode 02)*, viewers observe that Saul Goodman has grown increasingly indifferent to ethical consequences. This version of Jimmy is starkly different from

the insecure Jimmy McGill of previous seasons. What begins as a performance eventually solidifies into a core aspect of identity. **This shift echoes the picaresque tradition, where moral flexibility becomes a survival strategy in an unjust world.** As Lyons (2021) argues, Saul Goodman embodies ethical adaptability within a corrupt system, where survival depends on calculated deception.

5.2.1. 3 Gene Takavic: The final stage of identity dissolution

The Gene Takavic persona marks the final and most diminished stage of Jimmy's identity evolution. Gene represents a retreat into obscurity, paranoia, and emotional detachment. According to Fienberg (2022), Peter Gould describes Gene Takavic, as a man tripped of ambition, hiding from his former selves and law. He lives a hollow life, shaped by fear and haunted by the consequences of his immoral acts.

5.2.2 Moral Decline: Saul Goodman

Saul Goodman's moral decline aligns closely with the picaresque model, which frames moral compromise not as a fall from nobility, but as a pragmatic response to exclusion and systemic dysfunction. Unlike Walter White's descent into power-driven tragedy, Saul's transformation and ethical transgression is episodic, ironic, and layered with emotional trauma. As *The Week* (n.d.) notes *Better Call Saul* tells the story of a good man slowly broken by an unfair world and Saul Goodman's moral decline can be understood as a humane reaction to systemic disillusionment. Tedesco-Barlocco (2020) echoes a similar notion: Saul's transformation is not a straightforward moral descent, but is based on a lingering sense of longing. Ultimately, his decline seems more a result of navigating a unfair society and less a conscious decision.

One of the earliest signs of moral decline is evident in *Hero* (*Better Call Saul*, Season 1, Episode 4, 2015), where Jimmy stages a fake rescue to enhance his public image. This act, while relatively harmless, marks his growing comfort with deception in pursuit of personal gain. Mohamed(2015) notes that Slippin' Jimmy continues to descent down that slippery moral slope as he blurs performance and sincerity to boost his image, signaling a growing comfort with manipulation and deception as tools for success. In *Chicanery* (*Better Call Saul*, Season 3, Episode 5, 2017), he exposes his brother's psychosomatic condition in the court and wins a legal case. However, the emotional cruelty and manipulation involved signify a significant departure from the moral compass he once possessed. Saul's alliance with Kim Wexler marks his further moral deterioration (Franich,2022).In *Plan and Execution* (*Better Call Saul*, Season 6, Episode 7, 2022) their ruse to ruin Howard Hamlin's reputation has unanticipated consequences – Howard is killed by Lalo Salamanca, Saul's criminal client. Saul may not directly responsible for this, but it's his scheme that sets things in motion. His actions have now spiraled into matters concerning life and death.

By *Breaking Bad* (*Better Call Saul*, Season 6, Episode 11), Saul Goodman has fully become his manipulative persona. Detachment and opportunism are now his defining traits. In *Waterworks* (*Better Call Saul*, Season06, Episode 12), as Gene Takavic, he schemes again, showing an enduring need for deception. However, in *Saul Gone* (*Better Call Saul*, Season 06, Episode 13), he chooses confession over manipulation, reflecting a moment of self-awareness. While his arc follows the picaresque structure—episodic, morally ambiguous, and rooted in survival—this final act complicates that model by suggesting the possibility of redemption and the trace of Jimmy McGill, albeit faint, beneath the surface.

5.3 Intersecting Moral Trajectories

While Walter White and Saul Goodman live in the same morally complex universe, their journeys show different trajectories of moral unraveling and evolution of identity. Walter's descent is fueled by hubris and the desire for power, culminating in a complete embrace of his darker self. In contrast, Saul's journey is anchored in emotional rejection and self-preservation, leading to a gradual erosion of conscience masked by charm and legal tricks.

Walter builds the Heisenberg persona to assert his hidden power. He becomes who he thinks he really is. In contrast, Saul creates his flashy lawyer persona as a coping mechanism. This identity is a tactic for survival, not for self-realization. Both characters, driven by different reasons, show how seeking control in a corrupt system can blur moral boundaries and change personal identity.

Conclusion

This article has examined the different but connected moral paths of Walter White and Saul Goodman. It shows how identity and ethics change under pressure. By seeing Walter as a tragic figure and Saul as a clever survivor, the study highlights the storytelling methods used to make moral decline relatable. In the end, these character journeys emphasize the complexities of identity in morally uncertain situations. They encourage us to think more about how fiction portrays ethical breakdown as both personal and systemic.

Recommendations

This study opens several avenues for further exploration into character development and moral ambiguity in contemporary television narratives. Future work could investigate similar trajectories in other antiheroes across different genres and cultural contexts. Scholars might also consider incorporating psychological or sociological frameworks with regard to the understanding of viewer's empathy with morally compromised characters.

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