

“You can go fuck yourself!”: Precarious Masculinity, Emasculation, Sexuality, and Violence in *Breaking Bad*

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Abstract

This paper examines how emasculation as a fallen status within the gender order reinforces narrowly defined masculine expectations of behavior based on violence and power in the show *Breaking Bad*. Since masculinity is precarious, it is fragile and constantly has to be proven to other men. The male characters in this show deal with their emasculation by using violence towards others to re-establish their position within the gender order (Vandello and Bosson 2013; Connell 2005). The exception, Jesse (played by Aaron Paul), fails to recover and prove his masculinity and becomes the “permanent fag” as he struggles with the emotional turmoil associated with violence (Pascoe 2005). Since someone’s masculine status within the gender order is based in relation to age, social class, race and/or ethnicity, these are discussed as well. Furthermore, as masculinity is defined in opposition to femininity, the subordination of women assists in confirming one’s masculinity. Finally, the death of main characters reinforces normative gender constructions of masculinity as they fall victim to the violence inherent in patriarchal systems that equate violence with status. This examination is particularly important as the violence of white men in U.S. society becomes commonplace and normalized. This paper does not examine *Breaking Bad* from a Criminological standpoint, but instead focuses on masculinity and violence as social practices that reinforce the gender order.

Keywords: *Breaking Bad*, masculinity, violence, emasculation.

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Introduction

This article explores masculinity as a social practice in the critically acclaimed AMC series *Breaking Bad*. Specifically, this paper examine how masculinity is fragile and has to be regularly proven through violence and, as such, serves as a confirmation of a man’s status within the gender order within U.S. society (Connell 2005). The association between masculinity and violence is widely apparent within U.S. culture since

gender is often the best predictor of violence towards others (Blaine, 2018). One of the most devastating shootings in modern history that occurred in Las Vegas on October 1, 2017 in which Stephen Paddock shot over five hundred individuals attending a concert makes this examination particularly relevant (CNN.com).¹ *Breaking Bad* is valuable for scholarly inquiry for several reasons including the fact that this show regularly had millions of viewers (ranging from .97 million during season one to 10.28 million at the

¹ I selected this particular incident because of the massive scale of violence enacted. Unfortunately, I could have selected a number of incidents to reference since these occur with greater frequency in the United States.

series finale) glued to their sets (TV by the Numbers 2013). Furthermore, widely successful shows, like *Breaking Bad*, allow many individuals to live vicariously through the lives of others or even inspire viewers to enact violence towards others. Researchers have shown that an audience's exposure to violence is highly correlated with off-screen violence, especially in the U.S. (Bushman and Anderson 2015).² In addition, Gerbner (1997) has found that the greater exposure to television and other media strengthens prejudice, particularly as they relate to gender. Over time and according to social constructivist notions of gender, normative depictions of gender behavior become a part of what we perceive as natural behaviors that reflect differences between people rather than socially constructed identities (Berger and Luckmann 1966). As such, television not only informs us on what gender is; the institution perpetuates and maintains gender norms, especially when millions of viewers tune in weekly. Television's depictions of masculinity are extremely important when it comes to understanding how a society attempts to internalize (normalize and accept) beliefs about what gender is. With the rise of gendered violence in the U.S. primarily enacted by white men who are angry and feel a sense of aggrieved entitlement, examining the messages embedded within popular shows like *Breaking Bad* are of heightened importance especially as sociologists attempt to understand masculinity and violence within society (Kimmel 2017).

Summary of Show

Breaking Bad, created and produced by Vince Gilligan, is set in Albuquerque, New Mexico and stars Bryan Cranston, Anna Gunn, and Aaron Paul. It aired from January 2008 to September 2013 (five seasons in total and 64 episodes) on AMC and was later made available on Netflix (with 81 million subscribers) (Statistic Brain Research Institute 2016). The show begins with a middle-aged white high school chemistry teacher, Walter White (played by Bryan Cranston), who learns that he has lung cancer. As a high school chemistry teacher, he realizes that his earnings and his insurance will not be enough to pay for the treatment he needs. In addition, his life insurance will not be able to financially support his family after he dies. Despite going back and forth trying to decide what he will do, he decides to produce methamphetamines (or "meth") in order to financially support his family. This occurs after his brother-in-law, Hank (played by Dean Norris), who is a DEA

agent, discloses how much money one can earn in the meth business. He knows that with his experience and expertise in chemistry, he can make a product that is both very potent and economically fruitful. White begins to hide his business from his wife and family (especially his DEA agent brother-in-law), and throughout the course of the series, he learns how to deal with power hungry and often psychopathic criminals. Over the course of the show, White goes from an emasculated man (physically and socially) into a very confident, power hungry, ruthless meth king. It is through this development that we can see White construct himself as a force to be reckoned with especially as it relates to his masculinity and status. As such, *Breaking Bad* presents millions of viewers with a story of how an emasculated man uses violence to gain status among other men all-the-while appealing to viewers' curiosity with criminal activities in the comfort and safety of their own homes.

In this paper, I will examine how the male characters within *Breaking Bad* undergo emasculation (the loss of one's power and one's status among men) and compensate for this fallen status within the gender order. More specifically, I will show how violence and transformation are connected with one's masculinity as these are used to prove one's masculinity to other men in this series. Furthermore, since masculinity is fragile, this status is not stable throughout the show. In order to maintain one's masculinity and position within the gender order, the men with the most status use violence to prove themselves to other men. I will also discuss how femininity and emotions are viewed as oppositional to masculinity and when men have been emasculated, they are expected to reclaim their masculinity through violence. If a man struggles with the emotional aspect associated with violence towards others, his masculinity is vulnerable. In addition, men's sexuality (in the form of their ability to get erections and to be physically dominant over women) is coupled with this emasculated status as women play an important role in proving to other men their status within the gender order. Finally, I will discuss the importance of dying "like men" and how this reinforces violence as an indicator of one's masculinity to other men.

Previous Research

Unlike previous research that has examined *Breaking Bad*, this paper explores masculinity and violence and the process by which Walter White transforms from an emasculated man into a dominant,

² It is important to remember that correlation does not imply causation.

powerful, and violent man. Wakeman (2018) examines White's transformation into Heisenberg (White's alter ego within the meth community) from a biosocial and criminological perspective, but this paper focuses on the relationship between masculinity and violence as it relates to White's status within the gender order. This research attempts to extend Wakeman's argument, but also to emphasize that gender is a process that is done (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Furthermore, this paper builds upon Lewis' (2013) argument that links White's behavior with his cancer diagnosis. Lewis argues that White deals with his cancer diagnosis by being a fighter. As White battles cancer and becomes more violent towards others, his pride grows. Unfortunately, Lewis' research does not examine the role of gender—specifically masculinity, which is problematic since Kimmel (2011) argues that “violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood. Rather it is the willingness to fight, the desire to fight” (p. 143). Fighting plays an essential role in White's transformation from an emasculated family man into his alter ego Heisenberg. Furthermore, traditional notions masculinity impact White's desire to provide for his family as well as his desire to be recognized for his work, intelligence, and status. This paper also echoes the sentiment in Kopak and Sefihra's (2015) “Becoming Badass” who argue that White as a badass “assert[s] control, status, and recognition over those who attempt to marginalize and dismiss [him]” (p. 97). This paper will extend this argument by emphasizing the importance of masculinity in White's transformation into a “badass.” In a similar article, Faucette (2014) argues that White's transformation occurs mainly to prove to other powerful men that White is intelligent, capable, violent, and powerful. Faucette also examines how traditional notions of masculinity (i.e., provider, violent) form the basis of White's understanding of masculinity. This paper contends that violence is the main attribute that allows White to reclaim his masculinity. As a marginalized and subordinate man, White uses violence as he relies on “hegemonic masculine ideals for [his] sense of self” (Shuttleworth et al, 2012; p. 177).

Precarious Masculinity: Breaking and Reclaiming Masculinity

As a social construction, gender is done; it is our behavior and how these behaviors are done in relation to societal norms and expectations, which are based on

someone's perceived sex (West and Zimmerman 1987). For example, in U.S. society, we expect men to behave in accordance to gender norms (such as financially providing for one's family, being assertive, and being physically dominant). This behavior is also tied directly to proving oneself as oppositional to what society perceives as feminine. Kimmel (2011) asserts that “historically and developmentally, masculinity has been defined as the flight from women, the repudiation of femininity” (p. 138). Additionally, Vandello and Bosson (2013) argues that manhood needs to be earned and routinely proven. That is, masculinity is precarious. One's manhood is easily threatened and requires constant validation. When men fail to prove their masculinity, or appear weak to others, or when they are unable to fulfill duties tied to manhood, they are perceived as feminine or emasculated. This emasculation serves to subordinate various types of masculinity based on their status as “less than” (Connell 2005). In addition, this emasculated status, threatens a man's masculine status within the gender order (Connell 2005). Further still, Bosson and Vandello (2011) argue that precarious masculinity is closely linked to acts of aggression and violence as a means of repairing one's threatened masculine identity. As such, emasculated men may use violence towards others to reclaim their masculinity. As Connell (2005) notes gender is social constructed primarily because it is set of “social practices” (p. 79). These social practices or behavior serve to construct someone's masculinity in relation to the gender order within U.S. society. Since *Breaking Bad's* storyline focuses on the redemption of a man's status (primarily his masculinity) through the use of violence and this violence is likely to impact viewer's use of violence and the normalization of violence, it is a valuable material for scholarly inquiry (Bushman and Anderson 2015).

Masculinity as Violent and Transformative

Violence plays an important role as an emasculated man transforms and proves his masculinity to other men within society. The extent to which a man's masculinity is viewed, proven, and labeled as acceptable depends on how a man measures up to a society's ideal. In the U.S., the most valued and idealized form of masculinity in American society is hegemonic masculinity. This ideal is based on someone's race, social class, age, sexuality, physique,

as well as someone's ability to abide by society's gender expectations (Connell 2005). When one does gender, this behavior is read in relation to this ideal and when one does not meet this ideal, one is viewed as less than or as inferior (being subordinate) (Connell 2005). Furthermore, Kimmel (2011) asserts that "all masculinities are not created equal" (p. 137). According to R.W. Connell (2005), hegemonic masculinity presupposes a subordinate 'other,' sometimes because of various characteristics like age, race, or behavior. As a subordinate, you have been "expelled from the circle of legitimacy" (Connell 2005; p.73). The failure to attain this idealized status results in the creation of and the stratification of various forms of masculinity (marginalized and subordinate masculinities). It is also important to keep in mind that hegemonic masculinity, as an "ideal," is rarely embodied. One reason why it is valued and viewed as an ideal is because it is unattainable to many. On the other hand, those who attempt to fit the hegemonic masculine ideal because of their racialized privilege (e.g., privileged as being white in the United States) and perhaps social class may draw upon and attempt to abide by gender norms to prove or to maintain one's perceived masculinity and heterosexuality. One way this can be done is by using various forms of violence including emasculating and marginalizing others (Pascoe, 2005). By emasculating others, a man is attempting to prove his power and authority to label and denigrate another person. On the other hand, since masculinity is precarious, when a man is emasculated by others, he becomes the subordinate other. Connell (2005) argues that "it is the successful claim to authority, more than direct violence, that is the mark of hegemony (though violence often underpins or supports authority)" (p. 77). Although violence is not inherent in hegemonic masculinity itself as Connell suggests, a man attempting to attain this status (or reclaim his masculinity after it has been lost) may use various forms of violence to prove his status or (in the case of White) transform his status and authority. For a man, like Walter White, violence becomes an essential part of proving his masculinity and his status and authority within this stratified system.

In *Breaking Bad*, White uses violence to reclaim his masculinity and to gain status and authority. Furthermore, White desires recognition by other men for his power and authority. White specifically notes that chemistry, his area of expertise, is literally "the study of change" or the process of becoming and transforming (S.1, E. 1). He explicitly states that it is

about "growth, decay, then transformation." Later, White explains to his chemistry class, "the faster the change, the more violent and visible the results" (S. 1, E. 5). Not only do his own words foreshadow the journey he is about to embark on, but they also reinforce how violence plays a role in his transformation: the more violent someone's alteration, the more visible the results.

Emasculated Status

White, as an emasculated male, begins his transformation from a position of weakness. Emasculation, or being perceived as feminine, powerless, or deemed weak by other men, as an important part of masculinity's precariousness forces White and other men in *Breaking Bad* to become stronger, violent, and therefore more masculine. Since being emasculated connotes femininity and subordination, one way to reclaim one's masculinity is to enact violence towards others (primarily other men and the more powerful, the better) (Kimmel 2017). One way the main characters, Walter White, Hank Schrader (White's DEA agent brother-in-law), and Gus Fring (a meth kingpin who employs White and played by Giancarlo Esposito), prove their masculinity is how they deal with being emasculated. The character who undergoes excessive emasculation is White.

Emasculation and the Body

The premise of the entire show is based on White's pre-existing emasculation as well as his physical emasculation in the form of being diagnosed with lung cancer. Before his cancer diagnosis, it is clear that Walter White does not embody a powerful man. He teaches chemistry at a local high school and in order to make ends meet, he works a second job washing cars (often his own students' cars). In addition, his wife, his brother-in-law, and his son do not view him as capable. He comes off incapable of handling Hank's, his brother-in-law, gun (S.1, E.1). His wife reminds him of his financial obligations (being eight months pregnant, selling items on eBay, and reminding Walt to be firm with his car wash boss about his hours). His son, Walt Jr. (played by RJ Mitte), looks toward Hank as his role model despite White's ability to physically threaten young men who make fun of his son (S.1, E1).

When White is diagnosed with cancer, this is the final straw—his own body has turned against him. This diagnosis motivates White to fulfill his duties as a husband and father by financially providing for his family after his death. Lewis (2013) also argues that White's decision and approach to dealing with his cancer (i.e., to fight) is common among cancer patients. In terms of gender and his status within the gender order, White's body becomes the physical site for him to begin to resist further emasculation. Additionally, Connell (2005) notes that when a man's body becomes vulnerable, he may "redouble [his] efforts to meet the hegemonic standards, overcoming the physical difficulty" (p. 55). White's masculine status becomes vulnerable because his body becomes weak and cancer ridden. In addition, "the aged body symbolizes the unwanted and turns into a subject of collective stigma (Hazan 1994)" (Spector-Mersel 2006; p. 74). This diagnosis emasculates White. According to Messner (1990), "the body plays such a central role in the construction of the contemporary gender order because it is so closely associated with the 'natural'" (p. 213-214). In addition, White's cancer diagnosis—much like his own masculinity—is precarious—it is fragile, vulnerable, and needs to be proven. As Connell (2005) explains that "the constitution of masculinity through bodily performance means that gender is vulnerable when the performance cannot be sustained" (p. 54). For White, his physical vulnerability becomes an opportunity for transformation and redemption and a rejection of this supposed "natural" emasculation. Embedded within this perceived "naturalness," which is tied to the body, comes hierarchy and inequality (subordination) of others. White's physical and psychological emasculated status is very evident during the first and second seasons of the show since the secondary characters constantly treat White as inferior. Whether it is the subtle interactions with others, like Hank taking White's beer to subsequently toast White on his birthday (S.1, E.1) or attempting to force White to undergo chemotherapy (S. 1, E. 4), or White's feelings of emasculation when his own body turns against him, all of these interactions serve to transform White into becoming violent and therefore more masculine.

Emasculation and Skyler

One character who plays an enormous role in White's emasculation is his wife, Skyler (played by Anna Gunn). Skyler routinely makes her husband

appear inferior, weak, and unable to fend for himself, especially in front of others. For example, after White tells Skyler that he obtained pot (a complete lie that he fabricated to justify his interactions) from a former student, Jesse (played by Aaron Paul), Skyler does not believe that White can stand up to this former student and goes to Jesse directly to tell him that White will no longer be smoking pot (S.1, E.2). In addition, in the next episode Skyler goes behind White's back to ask his former colleagues to pay for his chemotherapy since she does not believe that White will be able to figure out how to pay these expensive medical bills on his own (S.1, E.3). Instead of believing that White can handle himself and provide for his family, Skyler appears to believe that he is incapable and weak. After finding out the White has cancer, Skyler decides to have an intervention to convince him to undergo chemotherapy since he rejects the advice of his doctors and undergo chemotherapy (S.1, E.4). Although Skyler appears to care for her family, by positioning White on the defensive in this scene she is overstepping her boundaries as White's wife especially as these behaviors are inconsistent with stereotypical notions of femininity, which tend to be read negatively (Blaine, 2018). During this intervention and despite Skyler's attempts, Marie, Skyler's sister (played by Betsy Brandt), appears to convince almost everyone that avoiding chemotherapy might be more humane. The violence that is occurring to White's body forces him to decide to either undergo therapy (i.e., fight back) or to die with dignity (i.e., give up). Hank even exclaims that White should "die like a man" in this scene (S 1., E.4). When Hank makes this comment, he suggests that White should spend the rest of his time living his life on his own terms and without assistance from others. Despite Skyler's efforts, White wants the decision to live or die to be his. By making this decision himself, White displays his authority and his masculinity. This is confirmed when Hank sides with White's decision. This is a small step, but this interaction with his wife in front of others displays his ability to establish his authority within his family. By behaving in this way, White resists being emasculated further by his wife and is therefore avoiding further marginalization within the gender order.

As White begins to participate in risky behavior (revolving around cooking meth), his audacity, tenacity, and his masculinity compensate for his emasculation. His gender transforms as a result of his emasculation and this violence is then thrust upon others. As a result of appearing so emasculated by

those around him, violence becomes his way to prove his masculinity to others. For example, one of the most pivotal scenes in the first season is when White deliberately uses violence to establish his authority within the meth drug scene (S.1, E.6). In this scene, White uses his knowledge of chemistry to create a bomb, fulminated mercury, to scare Tuco into paying him what he deserves for his work and to also stand up for his colleague, Jesse, who had recently been beaten by Tuco's bodyguards and subsequently hospitalized. White begins to understand that violence is the key characteristic and often necessary in order to transform and secure his authority over others and more specifically men who appear more dominant than him. In addition, this violence makes White feel alive. After proving his masculinity to Tuco, he gets into his car and feels an enormous rush, which he expresses physically.

Emasculation of Hank and Gus

Unlike White, Hank starts off the series as the man with the most power (Faucette 2012). For Hank, his power is obvious since he is upper middle class, white, and a successful DEA agent, a job in which he uses to intimidate and be physically aggressive with suspected drug dealers and addicts. In addition, Hank embodies "institutional power and organized violence [...] in the form of the state" (Connell 2005; p. 100). Hank's status is further proven by the fact that White's own son looks to him for advice and guidance. This changes when Hank becomes paralyzed from the waist down after a run-in with hit men (S.3, E.7). This physical disability and emasculation manifests into a psychological depression for Hank. He no longer feels like a man and he even resists sexual advances from his wife. In addition, this feeling of emasculation is not new for Hank. As Ruiz (2015) points out, Hank's masculinity becomes vulnerable after he begins to regret killing Tuco (S.2, E.5). Hank explains that killing Tuco "changed me" (S.3, E.7). Despite Hank believing that "the universe is trying to tell [him] something" and being "ready to listen," Hank continues his quest to find the meth king pin (S.3, E.7). His physical accomplishments grow as his curiosity and the investigation of Gus Fring, White's boss, develop. The closer he gets to catching Gus (and White), the stronger he physically becomes. Through Hank's physical development and his professional success (at least from his perspective and the DEA's), his masculinity and his status are confirmed.

Much like Hank, Gus Fring's emasculation transforms his behavior and later his own status within the gender order. Years before Gus meets White, Gus is emasculated by Hector Salamanca (aka Tio, Tuco's uncle), a high-ranking enforcer within Don Eladio's drug cartel. When Gus was just starting out in the meth business, his partner and lover Max, is killed right in front of him, which becomes apparent in the episode "Hermanos" in the form of a flashback (S. 4, E. 13). During this scene, Gus and Max endure homophobic remarks and gestures from Hector, and this culminates in Hector using a bullet to penetrate Max's body and kill him, which causes Gus to breakdown. According to Pascoe (2005), "penetrated men symbolize a masculinity devoid of power, which, in its contradiction threatens both psychic and social chaos" (p. 464). Hector emasculates Gus by using violence to prove and display how vulnerable Gus is and how his emotions make him weak (and feminine). The chaos unleashed in this scene emphasizes Gus' lack of power and control. This symbolic emasculation and perhaps his own fear for his life, leaves Gus scarred. He cries intensely and appears to feel extremely emasculated by Hector. Gus' emasculation becomes transformative especially as it relates to his status and power within society. Years later, Gus has no family or friends, has built a meth empire, and can coldly cut a man's throat in front of White and Jesse without blinking an eye just to prove his status and his power over them (S. 4, E. 1). Gus also has no problem killing children who are in the wrong place at the wrong time. Over the years, Gus's hate of Hector intensifies. Despite the possibility that Gus may hate Hector because he killed his partner and lover, what really seems to upset Gus is the power Hector wields over him. Gus fears Hector telling the DEA about his meth operation and thus is legitimacy as a successful business owner and power within the community. Ultimately, in season four's finale, Hector becomes Gus's Achilles heel since Hector agrees to let Walt put an explosive within his chair and bell. As Connell (2005) contends:

violence becomes important in gender politics among men. Most episodes of major violence [...] are transactions among men. Terror is used as a means of drawing boundaries and making exclusions [...] Violence can become a way of claiming or asserting masculinity in group struggles. This is an *explosive process* when an oppressed group gains the means of violence (my emphasis p. 83).

Hector, despite being physically disabled to the point that he cannot even talk, asserts his masculinity and power by destroying Gus' empire by using terror (using Gus' fear against him), which literally consumes Gus as he is incinerated and turned to ash (S. 4, E. 13).

In all of these cases, the physical and psychological emasculation of these men leave these men with very limited options for restoring and reclaiming their masculinity especially in their professions. They all reclaim their masculinity through violent measures. All three men become stronger, masculine, dominant, and more violent because of their emasculation and their determination to compensate for their perceived weaknesses. Furthermore, the fact that White, Hank, and Gus's masculinity ebbs and flows (or is lost and then reclaimed) over the series highlights how fragile (or precarious) masculinity is, especially by those who rise or fall from positions of power.

Emotion as Emasculation

Men who show weakness, especially when it comes to expressing one's emotions (with the exception of anger), are marginalized and become a subordinate other within the series.

Specifically, displaying emotion, other than anger, is equated with weakness and being feminine. White, Hank, and even Gus, have to deal with feeling inferior and weak (or feminine) and this feeling has to be conquered with violence in order to reestablish their positions as masculine men. On the other hand, Jesse expresses more emotions than the rest of the characters and also struggles emotionally with violent acts. For example, the idea that kids are expendable and are killed to protect his and other people's interests, disgusts Jesse. In addition, Jesse struggles with killing any human including Gale, despite knowing it is either him or Gale (S. 3, E. 13). Over the course of the show, Jesse's humanity (in the form of his emotions) becomes his greatest strength but also his greatest weakness. His romance with Jane, who dies because of White's intentional inaction, impacts Jesse tremendously (S. 2, E. 12). Jane's death becomes so emotionally draining for Jesse that his only escape is through meth. Later, he feels incredible guilt for the near death of the son of a woman he's become very attached to, Andrea (S. 4, E. 12). Despite the fact that Andrea's son's near death experience was not Jesse's fault, he blames himself for bringing a deadly

substance home. The most emotionally damaging relationship is the one Jesse has with White. For example, when White convinces him that it is not safe for him and that he must leave, they tearfully embrace (S. 5, E. 11). After Jesse realizes that White was the one who "accidentally" poisoned Andrea's son and manipulated him into believing it was Gus, Jesse refuses to leave because he believes that it is just another manipulation. Because of the emotional investment Jesse has in this relationship (even when he is suspicious), he cannot leave matters unsettled.

Jesse knows that his emotions make him vulnerable to manipulation. For example, one reason why Jesse cooks meth at the end of the series during season five is because he does not want anything to happen to those he loves. On the other hand, White can call upon his own perceived emotional weakness and emasculated status to make Hank feel uncomfortable. For example, White uses his emotions to make Hank feel so uncomfortable that Hank leaves White alone in his office (S. 5, E. 5). White uses this opportunity to place surveillance in his brother-in-law's office. From this portrayal, viewers can read how White's behavior is viewed as undesirable and weak, especially from Hank's perspective. One reason why White can utilize his emotions may be, in part, from his experiences with being emasculated. White knows that being emotional and feminine is read as weak and something uncomfortable for other men (not something White should accept). Not only does the display of "feminine" emotions make Hank uncomfortable, he makes sure that only one emotion affects him: anger. Despite how much he loves and cares for his brother-in-law, he will do everything in his power to do his job and arrest White. White, unlike Hank, is aware of his emotions to the extent to which he is fairly good at using them to his advantage.

In addition to masculinity being vulnerable based on how he deals with emotion, age and experience also affect this status. For example, since Jesse is a young man who has not adequately proven his masculinity since he does not want to be violent towards others, he is not quite considered an equal to White, Hank, or Gus. All three of the men at one time or another view Jesse as someone who is weak and beneath them and this appears to stem more from his immaturity than anything else. The one character who deviates from this slightly is White. In the first few seasons, White and Jesse develop an interesting relationship as they begin to "break bad." They begin as equal partners in the meth business, but White's status and position as the older male and the teacher dictates that White

should still look out for and protect Jesse. For example, White saves Jesse's life multiple times throughout the series and even Hank tells Jesse that White appears to genuinely care for him because he does protect him (S. 5, E. 12). Jesse, unlike White, becomes more human and perhaps more feminine and emasculated, in part because of his emotions, as the show progresses. In season one, despite the lack of confirmation from others, Jesse attempts to prove his masculinity by calling out White when he's "being a bitch." Johnston (2015) contends that "Pinkman never uses these denigrating, toxically gendered terms to women, although he is seek[ing] to claim power over others by using them to render other men feminine and thus exploited, weak, and submissive" (p. 26). This tactic, as Connell (2005) notes, is part of the process by which superior masculine men subordinate other men (p.79). Despite this attempt to emasculate White, Jesse always refers to White as "Mr. White" regardless of the familiarity established. Furthermore, Jesse's emotions keep him from taking the five million dollars he earned to get out since he views this money as blood money (S. 5, E. 7). Again, Jesse is viewed as emotionally weak and he is unable to secure his masculinity throughout the entire series because he is unable to exert violence like other men, like Hank, Gus, or White wield it. After White, Gus, and Hank are emasculated, they reclaim their masculinity and their status within the gender order by using violence. Jesse, on the other hand, does not want to be violent towards others, so his behavior and his gender becomes associated with femininity. For Jesse, his moral compass is closely tied to his appreciation for life and humanity. Deep down Jesse wants to believe people are good despite being mistreated and emotionally manipulated by those around him.

Since Jesse struggles reclaiming his masculinity by being violent towards others, he becomes the "permanent fag" because he cannot "man-up" and be violent towards others (Pascoe, 2005). Early on Jesse appears to be okay with violence (at least theoretically), but this is short lived. For example, when Jesse has to deal with death, like Jane's death as noted above, he becomes dependent on and finds emotional release in meth. His dependency on meth allows him to escape from his feelings and his emotions, which serve as a coping mechanism for his emasculated status. Jesse's transformation and his gender derive from his emotions and his rejection of violence. In addition, it is also important to remember the importance of labels and names in *Breaking Bad*, especially as it pertains to masculinity. For example,

Jesse's surname, Pinkman, explicitly emasculates Jesse. Furthermore, the fact that his first name is gender neutral reinforces this subordinate masculine status. Whether it is through his inability to compartmentalize his emotions and subsequently "man-up" and use violence towards others, or the fact that Jesse is disowned and orphaned by his family, or because the show's creator, Vince Gilligan, intentionally designed his character (even as subtly as choosing his name) to vary the forms of masculinity within the show—Jesse cannot reclaim his masculinity and cannot be accepted as an equal to other men.

Marginalized Masculinities

Other factors, such as social class, race and/or ethnicity, affect these characters in their attempt to measure up to society's ideal form of masculinity, hegemonic masculinity. These factors suggest that not only is gender a construction, but it also intersects with these classifications (Collins 2011). As noted earlier, Hank is the most privileged and represents the closest form of hegemonic masculinity at the beginning of the show, and his social class and race are two bedrocks of that status. Hank has a very good job with the Drug Enforcement Agency, owns his own house, and can confidently tell White that he will look after his family if White dies from cancer. From White's perspective, this can be interpreted as another form of emasculation as well since this may suggest that White has failed to adequately provide for his family. Hank is also a white male who often jokes about his race's own superiority. In addition, he quickly assumes and stereotypes those suspected of being "meth heads" and drug dealers as being "Beaners." Several of those he suspects and arrests are men of color. Hank's assumptions about race and White's whiteness works to White's advantage. On the other hand, Hector, Tuco, and Gus (at least racially and ethnically speaking) seem to be ideal candidates to operate and maintain a meth industry. His findings also reaffirm his assumptions about race. Ruiz (2015) points out how Tuco embodies stereotypical displays of Latino men by being flashy, violent, not very smart, and a drug user and after Tuco's death Hank begins to wonder if Tuco was a pawn rather than the main mastermind behind the illustrious Heisenberg blue meth empire. The exception to these stereotypes, however, is his partner Gomez, who is a Hispanic DEA agent. Hank may believe that Gomez is an uncommon and less stereotypical portrayal of nonwhites and exception to the rule (or a token) rather than evidence that may

question his prejudice. In addition, one reason why he quickly jokes and dismisses White as being a meth cook after he originally finds the initials W.W. in Gale's books is because Hank does not see White as capable or masculine enough to be involved in the meth business (S. 4, E. 3). White's status as an emasculated male as well as his race deflect Hank's suspicions. Furthermore, it is through the marginalization of men of color that allows White to be rendered invisible to authority figures, which then provides him the opportunity to become powerful.

Gus, unlike Tuco and Hector, has the social class and the status to elude arrest at least until adequate evidence is provided. Because Hank is eventually proven correct in his suspicions, he is promoted and given more power within the DEA, which helps to solidify his position as the hegemonic masculine male in the show. Despite being well educated and a high school chemistry teacher, White cannot financially support his chemotherapy and views himself as failing to attain the status of his "Gray Matter" colleagues. He also appears to care tremendously about paying his own way even if it means cooking meth. This social status and his desire to provide for his family after his death are why he decides to go into the meth business in the first place. As Kopak and Sefiha note "reaching this high level status [as a badass] is the product of an involved process [...] which requires a person to be malicious or violent as a method to command respect they desire" (p. 98-99). Over time White begins to enjoy his position of authority and gains respect as a badass, as his alter ego "Heisenberg," which serve to confirm his masculinity and also his rise in status (including his social class). The money that White accumulates (before it is stolen), the respect gained from other men, his ability to evade arrest, and his race also affirm his place at the top of the gender order.

Subordination of Women, Sexuality, Violence, and Power

By placing women in a subordinate position, men gain status over them. Over the course of the series, White establishes his position as the man in charge of his household when his masculinity is confirmed, he begins to gain status. At the beginning of the series, Skyler is the person in charge of the family. This is highlighted in her sexual behavior with her husband. In the pilot episode, Skyler, White's wife, massages White's penis as a part of his birthday present, but eventually asks White if "everything's okay?" because

he struggles with getting an erection (S. 1, E. 1). Later in the same episode, when White attempts to mount Skyler from behind and engage in sex, she is surprised by friskiness and virility. She exclaims, "Oh, Walt, is that you?" During this time period, White's risky behavior, in the form of cooking meth, affects how masculine and how sexually aroused he feels. His sexual arousal extends outside of the bedroom as well. Not only does he begin to sexually massage his wife during an official school meeting, but they end up having sex in their car while parked right next to a police car (S.1, E. 7). Afterwards, she asks him why it felt so good and he exclaims, "because it's illegal." White gets excited when he takes risks, sexual or otherwise. It is also important to remember that one reason why White becomes so sexually aroused during this school meeting is tied to the fact they are discussing the recent theft of scientific equipment that occurred, which was committed by White. Even though White may appear to be a prime witness or even suspect, his recent disclosure of his cancer and how emasculated he is perceived to be cause him to be of little interest. Because of White's emasculated status, his colleagues and even his brother-in-law are hesitant to believe that he would have enough agency (and assertiveness) to break the law. In addition, his whiteness also allows for him to be overlooked, especially since they arrest a man of color in relation to the disappearance of this equipment. Not only is the suspect a man of color, but he also has a record of smoking marijuana, which makes Hank believe he could easily be using this equipment for other drug related activities. The fact that White can engage in risky behavior and get away with it right under the nose of his DEA agent brother-in-law sexually excites him. This may also convey to White that he is smarter than his colleagues and his brother-in-law since he is able to allude suspicion and arrest. Unfortunately for White, the extent to which he is able to engage in sexually risky behavior with his wife is limited. When he attempts to engage in sex with Skyler in their kitchen and he is too violent and forceful, Skyler flees. Even though White is denied this sexual experience with his wife, which is emasculating, this violence reinforces Skyler's position within the gender order and is used to keep her submissive. Pharr (2011) contends that "male violence is fed by their sense of their right to dominate and control, and their sense of superiority over a group of people, because of their gender, they consider inferior to them. It is not just the violence, but the threat of violence that controls our lives" (p. 633). Although the violence White thrusts

upon Skyler does not appear to be intentional, it is still used to put her in her place. His physical domination over Skyler also emphasizes his desire to subordinate others. In the end, White has proven he is sexually aggressive and dominant over his wife. Skyler's opinion, in the end, does not matter. Instead, it is other men's opinions that matter when it comes to masculinity and status.

Unlike White, when Hank is emasculated, his wife can sexually arouse him. After Hank has recovered (despite still being paralyzed), Marie, his wife, tries to convince him that he can leave the hospital (S. 3, E. 12). In order to get Hank to leave, she makes a deal with him: if she can give him an erection, he will leave—and he does. Even though this situation makes Hank uncomfortable, he is still able to prove his masculinity and heterosexuality. The one area in which Hank fails to prove his masculinity and heterosexuality lies in his inability to propagate. White, on the other hand, has two children (one healthy and the other physically disabled). This comparison between Hank and White, also allows us to see how masculinity and social class intersect. Hank's middle to upper-middle class status might only be possible because he does not have any children. On the other hand, White's children (especially the financial burden tied to caring for a physically handicapped child) are a drain on resources. These resources affect someone's ability to attain the hegemonic masculine status. Because Hank does not have children, one may perceive him to be less masculine than other men, like White who despite being of lower social class has proven his masculinity and heterosexuality by fathering children. These examples and the comparison between Hank and White highlight the complexity behind hegemonic masculinity.

The direct comparison between Hank and White also reveals other interesting masculine elements. For example, it is no coincidence that both Hank and White sport looks that emphasize their masculinity by sporting shaved heads. White's immediate response when he notices he is losing hair (an outward sign of his body decaying and emasculation) is to shave it all off and his son quickly comments on how "badass" it is (S. 1, E. 6). The act of shaving their heads is a very phallic portrayal of their physical manhood. Ridding oneself of what may be perceived as being weakness (i.e., hair loss due to chemotherapy) is an assertion of power and dominance. It should also not be surprising that if White is attempting to emulate the hegemonic masculine male and Hank begins the

series as the closest to fit this ideal, then he should want to physically resemble Hank. In addition, for both Hank and White, resembling a penis not only reinforces their masculinity, but also their heterosexuality.

Despite these perhaps "hard" portrayals of heterosexuality, softer forms of heterosexuality are presented. For example, Jesse's relationships display the softer side of heterosexuality. Jesse's heterosexual relationships are emotional. Jesse becomes emotionally attached to both Jane and Andrea. For Jesse, these women and his emotional investment in them force Jesse to question his own humanity. Since emotions play an important role in these relationships, these relationships also emphasize Jesse's own emasculation and weaknesses. Other than his previous relationship with Max, Gus, on the other hand, does not have any relationships. One might conclude that since Gus has lost so much with his initial emasculation that he keeps himself very well insulated and guarded, including his sexual interactions. Gus' celibacy may also be self-imposed since these emotional and sexual attachments could threaten his security and empire. For Gus, his meth empire affirms his masculinity rather than his relationships with others.

The Rise of Heisenberg; Confirmation of One's Masculinity

Being recognized for his status, authority, and power becomes important to White as he reclaims his masculinity. It is no mistake that White attempts to affirm his position and refute his former emasculation and reclaim his masculinity when he says, "Say my name" and the distributor exclaims, "You're Heisenberg" and White trumpets, "You're God Damn Right!" (S. 5, E. 7). This interaction is vastly important in confirming his acquired masculine bravado and status as the dominant male. This scene signifies the completion of his transformation. Wakeman (2017) argues that White's transformation into Heisenberg is complete when he proclaims that he is "the one who knocks" and is the danger Skyler is worried about (S. 4, E. 6). However, it is through the recognition of other men that solidifies White's transformation as Heisenberg. The fact that White receives recognition for his status and identity as "Heisenberg" reinforces the acquisition of his masculinity. It is also vastly important when Hank figures out "Heisenberg" is White. When Hank figures this out, he is visibly

shaken and has a panic attack, which causes an accident (S. 5, E. 9). When they meet in Hank's garage, Hank believes that White is Heisenberg and yet he tells White that he "doesn't know who [White] is" and then White warns Hank "to tread lightly" (S. 5, E. 9). This recognition confirms that White's transformation into Heisenberg is complete.

White gains this status through the subordination of other men. As a "badass," White's status as the most masculine and powerful man within the meth empire is directly related to his ability to be violent and to "drift outside of moral constraints" (Kopak, Sefiha, 2015; p.99). Though Wakeman (2017) argues that Walt's transformation is rooted in his physiological relationship with his cancer (as he states, "through the transformation of cells" and through his actions)—as he becomes Heisenberg, it is through the recognition of other men that solidifies White's embodiment as Heisenberg. White's journey begins with his cancer diagnosis, but his position within the gender order is determined by being recognized by other men, especially men like Hank. Wakeman's research (2017) reinforces the idea that one's actions are connected to one's sense of self, but these actions are viewed in relation to gender norms within one's society. This echoes West and Zimmerman's (1987) argument that gender is done and Connell's argument that gender is a "set of social practices" (p 79). Furthermore, the name White chooses, Heisenberg, can also be read in terms of masculinity, especially, its precariousness. The Heisenberg principle (also known as the Uncertainty Principle), according to the Encyclopedia Britannica, is a physics principle that suggests that "the position and the velocity of an object cannot both be measured exactly, at the same time, even in theory. The very concepts of exact position and exact velocity together, in fact, have no meaning in nature." Like the Heisenberg principle, masculinity has no meaning in nature. One's position and one's velocity (or magnitude and direction) is not static, but in rather uncertain—it needs to be proven.

Not only do Hank, Gus, and White's lives show how their masculinity is tied to their violent behavior, but when they die, these men inform viewers that real men "die like men" as Hank noted (S. 1, E. 4). As noted earlier, Gus' death is a result of him feeling emasculated by Hector and the power he has over him. Gus explicitly wants to know if Hector compromised Gus' meth empire when he met with the police. Even though Hector is physically disabled (so much so that he appears that he can only ring a bell), he can still exert power over Gus by agreeing to participate in

White's plan to kill Gus. Even though Hector has little physical capability, he uses his bell to trigger explosives that White rigged to his wheelchair. Gus' fear and the relationship this has to his feelings of being emasculated by Hector result in his body turning to ash in front of viewer's eyes (S.4, E. 13). It is because of Gus' weakness (particularly tied to his emotions associated with being emasculated) that he dies. Hank, on the other hand, is willing to do everything in his power to die with dignity and the honor that is deserving of a hegemonic masculine male. After being wounded, Hank refuses to beg for his life. During this scene, White begs and attempts to negotiate for Hank's life. Hank, on the other hand, says, "My name is ASAC Schrader, and you can go fuck yourself," and then directly tells White, "You want me to beg? You're the smartest guy I ever met, and you're too stupid to see: he made up his mind ten minutes ago" (S. 5, E. 14). Hank's assertion for Jack to "go fuck himself" is his final to attempt reinforce his own status and superiority within the gender order. Despite White's attempts to emulate Hank, this particular scene shows how emotionally vulnerable White really is—which again reinforces how precarious his masculinity is. White held Hank in high regard, he cared about him, and loved him as his brother-in-law and for White to see Hank die appears to break White. He is completely shaken by Hank's death to the extent to which he does not appear to be able to function rationally. For example, when White rushes home to pack and get his family, only to have his wife and son ostracize him, he abducts his infant daughter (S. 5, E. 14). When White realizes this is unfair to his daughter, he returns her. Despite this momentarily lapse, it does not take White long to adjust and figure out his plan for revenge.

After White bounces back and gets his emotional and rational footing, he decides that he does not want to die alone, scared, and on the run. Instead, White develops a plan to eliminate those who have recently emasculated him (killing his brother-in-law and stealing almost all of his money). When it is time for White to confront the man who killed Hank, stole White's money, and displaced Walt from his position as lead chemist, White's violence is unprecedented. In the final episode of the series, White kills about a dozen men since he armed his car with a remote automatic weapon. Because White is emotionally attached to Jesse, he tackles and saves Jesse from the gunfire. Unfortunately, White does not escape unscathed. He tests Jesse and sees if Jesse will kill him. Before this incident, White admitted to Jesse that he

allowed for Jane, Jesse's former lover, to die, which could have motivated Jesse to kill White. Jesse, on the other hand, realizes that it is not worth the emotional guilt since White has already been gravely injured and decides to flee. The last decision White makes is to go and inspect the meth lab. It is this decision that allows him to receive credit and recognition as Heisenberg as he collapses presumably to his death in the lab. In the end, White's masculinity and his status are confirmed by his ability to go out in a blaze of glory and like Hank, "die like a man" (S. 1, E. 4).

Conclusion

In their attempt to achieve or prove their masculine status, White, Hank, and Gus use violence to re-establish their positions within the gender order after they have been emasculated. These characters are measured by their inability to achieve and/or maintain a powerful and idealized masculine position, and as a result they succumb to the ultimate price: their own demise. Not only does emasculation show us how precarious masculinity is, but it also plays an important role in how men compensate and attempt to reestablish their masculinity with violence. Using violence towards others and by dying like men, White, Hank, and Gus perpetuate violence as well as emphasize how emasculated men are weak, subordinate, and irrelevant until they can act like "real men." Furthermore, the ability to dominate other men and women (especially as it pertains to violence and sexual acts) informs viewers that being dominant over others is a desirable and masculine behavior despite the risks that come along with it. On the other hand, this show also suggests that if one wants to survive (since Jesse is the only man to survive) and have one's humanity intact, then one should cultivate one's emotions despite how vulnerable this may make the individual. However, this dichotomy of choices is one of the only major problems with the show. By suggesting that symbolic representations of masculinity and femininity are in direct opposition reinforces sexism and homophobia. In addition, it also fuels competition and violence among men that cannot be sustained without injury. Simply, violence, in its various forms, perpetuates inequality within society and amongst men. On the other hand, the fact that Jesse is able to successfully flee suggests that our current understanding of masculinity (and the violence tied to it) needs to change. Is the fact that Jesse is able to live a sign of progress and hope? Perhaps. As White

notes early in the first season, change that occurs quickly is often violent. Successfully changing the symbolic meaning behind behavior (or the labeling of behavior as masculine or feminine) may only occur in small increments in order to avoid marginalization and subordination. Since the masculine portrayals within the show are extremely destructive, the show may be suggesting that it is time for change.

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