

Emerging from the Cyclops' cave: Odysseus and Walter White

Beginning(s) -- *Odyssey 5* and *Breaking Bad 1*: The Marginalized Moment and Wakefulness

She found him sitting on the edge of the sea. His eyes were never dry from tears and sweet life drained out of him as he mourned over his homecoming now that the nymph was no longer pleasing to him. At night, certainly, he lay next to her in the hollow caves by necessity, unwilling though she was willing. But during the day he sat on the cliffs and the beach wracking his heart with groans and tears as he wept looking out over the barren sea.

Odyssey, 5.151-158

When we first hear about Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, he sits on the shore of Ogygia separated from who he was before his seven years with Calypso. The intervening years have been occupied with the distractions of nighttime sex and the weeping of his daytime hours, looking at the sea, lamenting what has been lost. Odysseus' return has been described as a rebirth—and twice on his way home he awakes on shores (Skheria and Ithaca) empowered again with the possibility of rediscovering his identity, of recuperating himself.

Jesse: It's weird is all, okay? It doesn't compute. Listen, if you've gone crazy or something...I mean, if you've...if you've gone crazy or depressed, I'm just saying...that's something I need to know about. Okay? I mean, that affects me.

[long pause]

Walter: I am awake.

Breaking Bad, "Pilot"

Walter White, the protagonist of AMC's *Breaking Bad* starts in something of a middle-aged fugue-state, his identity proscribed by the roles he plays—he is a teacher, father, and husband. His life seems complete until it is disrupted by cancer and its promise of a premature end. For a short time, Walter is like Odysseus in book 5 of the *Odyssey*, paralyzed by grief and rendered helpless by external circumstances. But his desperation to continue on in the roles assigned to him, to be the providing father and husband after his death, leads him to a new course of action—the cooking of crystal methamphetamine and the first acts of violence in a relatively

tranquil life. When his former student Jesse Pinkman, remarks on this change, Walter announces “I am awake”.

It was Walter’s declaration of wakefulness, his age, and finally his character that first made me think of Odysseus. Odysseus’ and Walter’s moments of wakefulness are common points of transition on deceptively divergent narrative arcs. At their moments of helplessness, both protagonists appear resigned to what we might call fate, but their reclamation of self-determination invites the audience to explore the relationship between external action and personal responsibility. Walter’s epiphany turns him into a man of force who hears and tells new stories, creating an identity alien to his former self and his family. Odysseus’ waking returns him to the physical world but he must hear and tell stories first before claiming a version of himself who can act to reunite with that lost identity of father, husband and son. Despite this contrast in narrative arcs, the stories bear essential similarities in theme and character that rely on western narrative traditions and whose contemplation help to illuminate not just the continuities of this tradition but the relation between the act of narration and the creation of our cultural and personal selves.

Other parallels that I think increase the similarity of these ‘heroes’ are (1) the characterization of each man’s cleverness and the *compositional* importance of this character trait; (2) their own and their narratives’ manipulative use of their names; and (3) the importance of their families for establishing their movement to and from their identities. Along with the importance of storytelling in general, each narrative (4) also culminates in complex endings that invite reflection on the nature of the tales themselves and the audiences who witness them. This comparison has helped me to reconsider the end of the *Odyssey* and appreciate more deeply the nuance of the composition of the show *Breaking Bad*.

Admonitory Excursus: *The Comparative Method*

In making these comparisons, I do not mean to imply that the creators of *Breaking Bad* had Odysseus or the *Odyssey* in mind when writing and producing this series (although, I wouldn't rule it out). Instead, I think that many of these elements are current in our representative culture—literature, art, film—and our self-representative cultures—the stories we tell about ourselves—from multiple sources. First, and at an anthropological level, these elements are drawn from myth in what has been popularized as the heroic pattern or, famously in the 20th century, as Joseph Campbell's monomyth. Second, and obviously related to the first, the narrative pattern of the *Odyssey* has long been a primary intertext for Western literature, one that has only increased in popularity in the last century. So, it is not at all surprising to discover similarities in narration of long-duration about individual men. What is important, I suggest, is the degree and quality of the similarities and what this analysis can bring to the understanding of both tales.

(1) *Emerging from Cyclops' Cave: The Clever Hero*

Muse, tell me about the man of many ways who traveled so far after he sacked the sacred city of Troy. He saw the cities and knew the mind of many men as he suffered much grief in his heart on the sea while trying to save his life and the homecoming of his companions. He didn't save his friends even though he wanted to because they perished thanks to their own wickedness. The fools ate the cattle of Helios, Hyperion's son. And their homecoming day was destroyed.

Odyssey 1.1-9

From the beginning of our *Odyssey* we are told what kind of a hero to expect—Odysseus is not swift-footed like Achilles or a club-wielding lion-tamer like Herakles, he is *polumêtis Odusseus*, the wily, clever Odysseus who is also *polytropos*, much-traveled and much suffered. Indeed, the epic insists that *suffering defines* him. Walter White, in important ways, inhabits this heroic

sphere: he is middle-aged, doughy and, as we learn from the first episode, made weaker by cancer. So Walter is also a sufferer, but, as we find out quickly, he is also *polymêtis*.

For both Odysseus and Walter White, their wits help them enter into danger and darkness and emerge victorious. When I first thought of these two narratives together, I noticed that the cleverness motif not only has compositional significance for the *Odyssey* and *Breaking Bad*—each narrative moves in greater cycles of challenge, clever response, and victory—but it also has unexpected consequences in the revelation of each man’s character.

The most famous scene of antiquity on vases concerning Odysseus is of his blinding of the Cyclops Polyphemos (*Odyssey*, book 9). He is trapped in a hostile environment and met by the threat of unconquerable force. Intelligence, as we find out, beats force. The scene proceeds with an accumulation of tricks: He gets Polyphemos drunk and lies about his name before he extinguishes his eye. To exit the cave by evading the monster’s searching hand, he secures his men to the bottom of sheep and himself to the bottom of the ram.

If we think broadly, this cycle repeats itself in the epic (which is to be expected from such a massive oral-derived composition): he uses a trick to best Circe—albeit one borrowed from Hermes, who represents tricky intelligence (book 10). His possibly deceptive singing in the home of Alkinoos secures his homecoming from the Phaeacians and the ends their way of life; in Ithaca with the help of Athena he uses disguise and his lying wiles to infiltrate first the house of Eumaios and then his own house where his intelligence turns *his* house into the Cyclops’ cave—they secure all the exits, remove all the weapons and then slaughter the suitors. The pattern is clear: enclosed spaces, tricks, happy outcomes for the hero.

What I observed only after reflection, though, is that this pattern is similar and equally compositional in the series run of *Breaking Bad*. In the pilot episode, Walt and Jesse are threatened by two lower-level drug dealers who plan to kill them. Walt, in establishing the basic pattern of the show, uses his superior knowledge of chemistry to poison his assailants with the chemicals they think he is using to prepare drugs. Later on in the first season, Walter enters a monster's cave of his own when he attempts to win back his drugs stolen by the psychotic Tuco—and win vengeance for Jesse's beating. Again, he uses his intelligence to disguise a powerful explosive as a drug that allows him to win the money, a deal and the respect of the monster. This pattern repeats into the fourth season and even helps to bring the series to its end. He kills the druglord Gus Fring with a trap and a trick, a bomb hidden in a wheel chair. But what really made me once again rethink the end of the *Odyssey* is that though Walter starts out as the victim, by the end of the series *he is the monster in the cave*. When he returns from his exile in New Hampshire to save his family, Walter goes to the dark lair of the neo-nazi gang he once employed (now something like the suitors who threaten Odysseus' home). When Walter enters their lair he uses his superior wits by designing the mechanical weapon that sprouts from his car and, like Athena in disguise in the *Odyssey*, helps to bring death to his opponents. Both Odysseus and Walter White, then, start out using cleverness to *counter danger and violence* but increasingly engage in violence on their own. What begins as a use of intelligence as a matter of a survival slowly changes into less clearly justifiable acts of murder and force.

(2) *Heroic Names and Fame*

Another thing that made me think of Odysseus as I witnessed the transformation of Walter White is the disclosure of different names and the impact of fame on character change. The *Odyssey*

makes it clear that everyone knows who Odysseus is (even if they are wrong) and *Breaking Bad* more than once notes the positive and negative consequences of Walter's fame as Heisenberg. And yet, despite concerns with fame, both narratives feature their heroes struggling to create and reclaim divergent and sometimes even contradictory personas. Each hero circulates a false name and struggles with claiming his own. And, more importantly, the tension between disclosing and withholding names contributes to the force that moves both narratives to their violent ends.

“Cyclops, you asked me my famous name? I will tell you and you give me the guest gift you promised. My name is Noman [*outis*]. My mother, father and everyone else calls me no man.”

Odyssey 9.364-370

I said that and he immediately answered me with his pitiless heart: “I will eat Noman last after his companions. That's your guest gift.”

Odyssey 9.408-412

“Friends, Noman [*outis*] is killing me with a trick, not strength”.

They answered him in turn, speaking winged words: “If Noman [*me-tis*] is harming you when you are the way you are, then there's no way for Zeus to heal the sickness. Pray to your father, Lord Poseidon.”

Odyssey 9.408-412

When enclosed within the Cyclops' cave, Odysseus resists true disclosure of his name. In that famous bit of ancient wordplay he insists that his name is No-one—apt because in one form of the Greek it *sounds* like the word for cleverness, *mētis*, and because it turns out to be a joke on the pathetic Cyclops who is ignored by the fellow Cyclopes when he wails that “no one is blinding him”. When Odysseus leaves the cave, he boasts aloud his real name so that the world will know who accomplished such a clever act, and it is this announcement that brings the curse upon him that delays his homecoming for so long.

Cyclops, if any mortal man asks you about the wretched blinding of your eye, tell them that Odysseus the city-sacker blinded you, the son of Odysseus whose home is in Ithaca!

Odyssey 9.502-5

Indeed, the *Odyssey* toys with *not naming* Odysseus and with deferring the disclosure of who he is. The epic famously avoids naming him for 20 lines, repeatedly throughout the narrative he is referred to with the demonstrative *keinos* as “that man”; he defers naming himself in Skheria for

three books until his name becomes the incipit of his tale. And, to expand upon this delay even further, when he gets to Ithaca he delays indefinitely in the recuperation of his name. It becomes clear over the course of the *Odyssey* that naming is important to the tale and to Odysseus' understanding of himself as the *way* he chooses his name activates a different concept of self. When he declares his name to Alkinoos, he is the son of Laertes from Ithaca; when he speaks to Polyphemos he is a victor in the Trojan War.

Now, first I will tell you my name so that you will know it and I may stay your guest-friend after fleeing that pitiful day and inhabiting a far-off home. I am Odysseus the son of Laertes. I surpass men in all tricks and my fame reaches up to heaven. And I live in beautiful Ithaca.

Odyssey 9.16-20

The *Odyssey*, then, offers Odysseus the man various possible ways of recuperating his past and his identity through the reclamation of his name. As he takes back his name, he transforms from that man left to cry helplessly on the shore to a disguised spy and eventually a bloody avenger. Walter White, as any viewer sees, also undergoes a radical metamorphosis. And an interpretive crux for *Breaking Bad* is how we understand Walter's transformation, connected in part to the act of naming and the interest in fame.

Tuco: What's your name?

Walter: Heisenberg.

Tuco: Heisenberg. OK, have a seat, Heisenberg.

Walter: I don't imagine I'll be here very long.

Breaking Bad, 1.6 "Crazy Handful of Nothin'"

When Walter enters Tuco's lair and is asked for his name, he hides it to make a separation between Walter White father, husband and teacher dying of cancer, and Walt, the meth-cook, by taking on a new name, Heisenberg. I suspect that the choice of this name is on the level of the character an initial joke—the foreign sounding scientist is best known in popular culture for the uncertainty principle—and on the level of composition it perfectly embraces the potentials masked by the uncertainty of a false name.

Over the course of the show Walt loses Walter White and embraces Heisenberg. One common trait between the identities is pride—but Walter’s confidence in his abilities and reliance on science to elude danger morphs into Heisenberg’s arrogance and obsession with the purity and propriety of his drugs. He needs people to know that he’s the best and this need, coupled with greed, helps to motivate his transformation. Gus Fring the drug lord plays upon Walt’s vanity to lure him back into production and when it seems that both Jesse and Walter are free of suspicion, Walter cannot abide the deceased Gale receiving the credit for his genius. This interest in an illicit reputation helps to collapse the distance between identities insofar as it keeps his DEA brother-in-law Hank on the trail of the blue meth.

Walter: Hank, not to tell you your business, but I'm not sure I agree.

Hank: What do you mean?

Walter: Well, you showed me that notebook and from what I saw – and this is just my humble opinion – from what I saw on those papers...genius? Not so much. I mean, there was no reasoning, no deductions in those pages, so to my eye, all this brilliance looks like nothing more than just simple rote copying, probably of someone else's work. Believe me, I have been around enough students to know. **So this genius of yours, maybe he's still out there.**

Breaking Bad, 4.4 “Bullet Points”

In the series’ final act, however, Walt’s true departure from Walter White emerges when he not only takes ownership of the murder of Gus Fring but also demands recognition for his fame, in insisting his new partners *say his name*, Heisenberg. In an inverse relationship to Odysseus’ reclamation of his name, Walter White embraces a false name and its public declaration signals his most outrageous deeds and the truest departure from his former self. Odysseus’ claiming of his real name connects his questionable behavior to his public self and results in an exile and deprivation of his external connections. Walter White, for the period that he is Heisenberg, gains wealth and fame but also earns exile and alienation from the relationships that once defined him.

Walter: You know. You all know exactly who I am. Say my name.

Declan: Do what? I don’t—I don’t have a damn clue who the hell you are.

Walter: Yeah you do. I'm the cook. I'm the man who killed Gus Fring.

Declan: Bullshit. Cartel got Fring.

Walter: You sure?

Walter: That's right. Now say my name.

Declan: ...You're Heisenberg.

Walter: You're goddamn right.

Breaking Bad, 5.7 "Say My Name"

(3) Family, Identity and Narrative Memory

The *Odyssey* and *Breaking Bad* are in part fascinating because both narratives feature their protagonists telling stories to cloak and disclose their identities in turn. In their use of narrative, I see both similarity and some deeper truths about the divergent nature of individual identity.

Odysseus' lies are an instrument in achieving his vengeance on Ithaca. His stories reunite him with a past version of himself. Walter White, on the other hand, uses lies with greater frequency and intensity as the distance between his previous self and his new persona Heisenberg increases.

The *Odyssey* is obsessed with the uses and consequences of storytelling—but it is the efficacy not the truth-value of Odysseus' tales that matters. In Walter White's fabrications, *Breaking Bad* explores the breaking point of creating new narratives for self-definition—Walter's lies start out defensive but eventually begin to fail to achieve their ends. In this opposition, though, we can identify a similar anxiety about the ability of stories—the way we frame and communicate events—to effect the world and shape ourselves.

Odysseus, when we look at you we don't take you for that kind of con-man and thief which the dark earth multiplies and who fabricates lies. No, your words have grace and your thoughts are noble as you speak as skillfully as a singer.

Odyssey 11.363-8

He knew how to tell many lies similar to the truth and her tears fell as she heard him.
Odyssey 19.203-4

We know how to speak many lies similar to the truth and we know how to utter the truth when we want to.
Hesiod, *Theogony* 27-8

Odysseus is famously compared to a singer who knows how to make lies that sound like the truth. The point of this comparison (echoing what Hesiod says the Muses taught him in the *Theogony*) isn't to insist that Odysseus is lying but that the content and the character of his words make it impossible or undesirable to question their truth-value. In his bald-faced Cretan Lies especially, it is clear how he uses elements 'truth' to create a probable identity to test those he left behind. And, yet, even as he does this he actually moves closer to reuniting with those very people from whom he was restrained—his servant, son, nurse, wife and then father—to the point that when he attempts the same testing of his father he breaks down in tears and relents.

Psychologists have shown that memory has a social aspect—the stories we rehearse together help us to maintain intimacy with family and friends and confirm who we are in relation to one another (see Charles Fernyhough's *Pieces of Light* for a very readable overview of some of these studies). While Odysseus reveals aspects of himself through his lies, the stories in the shared memories with Eurykleia, Penelope and his father confirm for them who he really is. Walter White follows a different trajectory as he lies to his family about his actions and, ultimately, lies to himself about who he is. Full disclosure seems to unsettle Walt—he hides his cancer from family and friends for a surprising amount of time. Early on, he brings shame upon himself, explaining away his involvement with Jesse by copping to marijuana use, hiding an abduction by the psychotic Tuco by claiming he fell into a fugue state in the desert and backing it up by walking naked into a supermarket. Later in the series, Walter attempts to surmount the uncontrollability of these lies by enjoining his wife in them. Together, they create the master narrative of an illicit gambler whose intelligence led him to success in the criminal world. Like

Odysseus' Cretan lies, the story has a certain verisimilitude. But, unlike Odysseus' stories, this lie only takes Walter further away from himself.

Both *Breaking Bad* and the *Odyssey* bear witness to figures who are separated from past versions of themselves. Along the way, each narrative emphasizes that the stories we tell have a material effect on the way we understand the world and that a rupture develops when we as individuals believe things not held by others. Fame, the story known to the world and embraced by the self, is in part a way of creating and ensuring a public and more stable identity. But, for both Odysseus and Walter White, personal identity also relies upon and consists of the memories we share with our near and dear. Our *public* identities are created by external realities—the places we inhabit, the experiences we share with people, the friends and family who bestow social roles upon us. While both the *Odyssey* and *Breaking Bad* make their heroes' families essential to the exploration of their identities, the two narratives follow inverse paths—Odysseus does everything he can to return to his family and set things right for them while Walt starts out with an intimate circle only to lose his family even as he claims he sacrifices for them.

Odysseus' Journey Back (To Himself)

Book 5:	Ogygia (builds a raft)
Book 6:	Skheria: (washes up naked)
Books 7-8:	Conceals his identity
Books 9-12:	Tells his story
Book 13:	Return to Ithaca
Books 14-15:	Conceals his identity
Book 16:	Reunion with Son
Book 17:	Returns to his home
Books 18-21:	Conceals his Identity
Book 19:	Identity revealed via scar
Book 21:	Identity confirmed via bow
Book 22:	Slaughter of the Suitors
Book 23:	Reunion with Penelope, identity confirmed via bed
Book 24:	Reunion with Laertes, story of the groves

One of the essential themes of the *Odyssey* is *nostos*, literally “a return home” (also defined by Douglas Frame (1978) as a “return to life and life” or “salvation, not death” by Anna Bonifazi

(2009)), but more broadly it engages the epic and its audience in *nostalgia* “pain for homecoming”, a longing for a reunion with memory—a shared memory that confirms in large part who we are. In the steps that take Odysseus from Ogygia back to his own bed, he undergoes discrete reunions. First, on Skheria, he begins the process of recuperating his identity in front of the Phaeacians. Returned to Ithaca, Odysseus is confirmed as a denizen of that land through his memory of the place rehearsed with Athena and then finally in book 24 when he tells the stories of the groves of trees with his father. In between, he returns to his pre-war self by becoming a father of Telemachus, a husband to Penelope, and a violent ruler of his people. In each case, Odysseus’ identity is confirmed through objects—the scar, the bow, the bed, the groves—that are connected to stories rehearsed communally. It is of no small import that after they have sex, Odysseus and Penelope tell each other the stories of their time apart—this is the creation of a new shared memory, the integration of old identities and new.

Although Walter White does not go into full exile until the final season of the series, the show’s narrative arc is built upon steps of withdrawal and abortive returns that communicate the fragmenting of his old identity. Walter starts out defined by his familial and social roles but is separated by his suffering, by his cancer. Once he enters into the illicit drug trade, he cannot unite the disparate parts of his identity and so they both remain incomplete. During the first few seasons, he repeatedly tries to return to the man he was before, but the Siren songs of money, excitement and ego do what Siren Songs do, they deprive him of a true homecoming.

Where Odysseus’ violence brings his family back together, Walter’s violence tears him apart. Of course, part of the show’s emotional resolution comes from Walter’s return when he actually sacrifices himself for his family’s well-being, thus securing their survival through a final separation from him. Walter’s reunion with his Penelope is a sad one, but symbolically relevant.

In their final scene when Walter admits to her that he did everything for himself, husband and wife resolve the tension between his different identities and effect a return to the only common narrative left to them.

Walter: A burial site. That's where they will find Hank and Steve Gomez. [Skyler weeps] That's where I buried our money. The men who stole it from us. The men who still have it. They murdered Hank and Steve and put them in that hole. Now you trade that for a deal with the prosecutor. Get yourself out of this. Skyler. Skyler. All the things that I did, you need to understand—

Skyler: If I have to hear, one more time, that you did this for the family—

Walter: I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it. And... I was... really... **I was alive.**

Breaking Bad, 5.16 “Felina”

Odysseus’ journey takes him from the darkness of Ogygia back to “light and life” in his own land. Walter’s journal takes him in the opposite direction—and the show’s visual apparatus takes him from the blinding sun of the first few episodes to the miasmic darkness of the end. And, yet, despite this powerful contrast in their outcomes, something about these endings is unsettling.

(4) *How to end the Tale*

The fatal distractions of money, power and fame obviously drive *Breaking Bad* to its conclusion; and heroes and villains alike in the *Odyssey* meet hardship for similar reasons. A Hellenistic scholar named Aristophanes of Byzantium believed that the natural ending point of the *Odyssey* was the reunion of Odysseus and Penelope. Not only does the epic end in a moment of divine intervention that calls into question the victory that preceded it, but we also learn that Odysseus must leave home again. The difficulty of ending the tale is similarly clear in the run-up to the closing of *Breaking Bad*, the closure of which has immediate consequences for how we judge this story and its man. The difficulty of ending both tales reflects in turn on the complexity of

defining and maintaining identity and indicates the complicity of the audience in the choices made in the telling of the tale.

In book 24 the suitors' families gather and debate a response to Odysseus' slaughter. One side accuses him of killing off two generations of Ithaca (the men he took with him and the young men he killed when he arrived home). They demand vengeance for the vengeance wrought. The other side attributes the act to the gods and refuses to work against Odysseus. The debate forces the audience to think about the slaughter it just witnessed and to what extent Odysseus was justified to kill those 100 some-odd men. It may also trouble us about the ethics of cheering him on. When Athena and Zeus meet to resolve the conflict their decision maintains ambiguity and calls into question the nature of the epic itself as they decide to make everyone forget the deaths of their loved ones and to have Odysseus rule as he did before—even though we know that he will soon leave again. To make matters stranger, the outcome is effected through a sudden divine intervention, akin to a *deus ex machina* in Athenian tragedy.

The sudden end facilitated by an intervening god marks out the impossibility of resolving the conflict by other means and also hints at the difficulty of ending the tale. It amounts almost to an admission that for this story there is no adequate end. In part, this signals the difficult morality of vengeance; but it also anticipates the structure of some of the Platonic dialogues that end with what we call *aporia*, a moment of pathlessness indicating that something has gone wrong and that we need to start our investigation again. The *Odyssey's* *aporia* derives both from the lack of true resolution—the destruction of social identity that comes through the creation of an amnesty—and the undermining of epic itself since *forgetfulness is anathema to fame*. The sudden, startling conclusion following the split opinion of the Ithakans and the ad hoc divine resolution puts the burden on the audience to question our own assumptions, to 're-read' the tale.

In a way, the end of *Breaking Bad* is simpler but it still complicates matters for the audience and in doing so invites a reconsideration of itself in entirety. Walt's clever trick with the M60 machine gun, a reflex of his characterization as a clever hero, also represents the corruption of that very quality. Like Odysseus, Walter slaughters a house full of threats to his family. But Walter's slaughter leads to less ambiguity because the character of these suitors has been established as wicked beyond doubt. And still, we are left to wonder about the violence itself: Jesse Pinkman refuses to kill Walter White even as a portion of the audience may want him to die. The delight in the deaths, even if deserved, reflects our own blood-lust. Jesse's choice to walk away reminds us that Walter once had choices too. But *his* corruption has been *our* entertainment.

Walter's story in part effects a more absolute closure than the *Odyssey* because it ends with his death. But as he dies surrounded by lab equipment, the look on his face seems to be one of satisfaction, as if this were the ending he awaited all along. Jesse Pinkman's mixture of tears and joy at his escape may in fact stand in as well for our own reactions as we witness the end of the tale. But, at the same time, I have to wonder if we too are haunted by the violence the way I imagine that Jesse will be. The audience almost feels relieved for the death of Walter White because it resolves the tensions and contradictions in his character with ease and without the messy complications of law and the questions of just punishment. But the consequences of his corruption and transformation carries on in the world around him.

In the end, both the *Odyssey* and *Breaking Bad* end because they have to and it is up to us to give them new meaning. In the process of making meaning, we generate stories and memories of our own and these become part of who we are. From comparing the two tales it is clear that there are significant differences—however much I want to convict Odysseus for his crimes, his

epic celebrates him as a survivor. Walter White, though certainly a trickster hero like Odysseus, also inhabits that Christianized space of the legendary Dr. Faust whose bargain with the devil brings him both fame and damnation.

And yet, if we can cast some of these differences aside, both narratives dramatize for us the way people create identities—both individual and cultural—based on the stories they tell. And, furthermore, the stories we tell about ourselves are influenced by the stories we hear. If there is a moral to gain from simplifying this process, what we find in both narratives is how rupture and pain issues from the distance between the separate identities we hold for ourselves. Fragmentation and isolation issue from memories that are not shared, from lives that are lived enclosed without others. The beautiful power of storytelling is that it can bring people together and help us return home. The flipside of this of course is the peril that new stories have the power to obliterate who we were.

And, finally, perhaps most importantly because the elusive point is easily lost, both narratives gesture towards their own power at identity formation and corruption. When we enjoy stories together, we create a common memory, a shared grammar of experience that serves to ease communication and understanding among us. Great narratives in all their complexity understand this and refuse to allow this to be a simple process. The ends of the *Odyssey* and *Breaking Bad* insist that we contemplate our own complicity in their violence and understand that their only true resolution comes through our own process of interpretation. It is this new step in the story unbound that informs who we are and who, at the end of the tale, we will be.

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