

Hour 25 Video Dialogue: The Odyssey and Breaking Bad, with Joel Christensen

~ Joel Christensen on the *Odyssey*, *Breaking Bad*,
and Problematic Endings ~

CLAUDIA FILOS: This is Claudia Filos, I am with the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington D.C. and I work on two projects primarily - the HeroesX project and the Hour 25 project, and today I am here with two very special people in our community. I just want to introduce Joel Christensen who is our visiting scholar, and I hope everyone else can just introduce themselves briefly.

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: - Hi, this is Joel Christensen and I am at University of Texas at San Antonio and a Fellow at the Center for Hellenic Studies this semester. I work on Homer and I guess many other things.

CLAUDIA FILOS: Thanks Joel. Brian, can you introduce yourself?

BRIAN PRESCOTT-DECIE: Sure, my name is Brian Prescott-Decie and I work at American Lebanese University in Beirut. My interests in the classics are fairly wide-ranging, but at the moment I am working primarily on *Antigone*, Sophocles' *Antigone*. That's it.

CLAUDIA FILOS: Thank you. So Joel, we are so excited that you are here to talk with us about Homer, and I know you been spending a great deal of time thinking about the *Odyssey*. And you also spend a lot of time thinking about modern media in relation to that and the way they can, the way modern narratives can help us understand the narratives we read in Homeric epic. Can you talk a little bit about that?

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: Sure, for a long time I guess I have been a bit of a comparativist, but not in the way people usually are. I am not really interested in finding geological relationships between things. I am really interested in sort of reading things together and seeing what kind of new meanings can be produced when take things that are not necessarily from the same place in time and see how they illuminate one another. Something like the *Odyssey* it is so deep and meaningful, you carry it around with you. So when you encounter new things it makes you see the text in a new way, especially when you look at complex and well integrated narratives of different types. So for instance, *Breaking Bad*, is part of what people call the golden age of dramatic television, and I really think we are sort of at the end of it. But you know we are looking at a period back of almost a decade now when television shows run full seasons and they have developed arcs with complex themes and characters who really grow and change over time. And with something like Walter White in *Breaking Bad*, you get a figure who transforms to the extreme. And I think if you're looking at this type of elaborative narrative there are a couple of different places where you can see real parallel for ancient myth and epic in general. But I guess that is just a starting point.

CLAUDIA FILOS: So that is interesting that you are mentioning *Breaking Bad*. So you did come a few days ago and have a live time to chat with our members in the chat room and that was a really great conversation and one of the things that came up in our discussions before your visit and during your visit were the strong reactions that people had to the character, the main character of *Breaking Bad* because he even in the beginning I think is morally ambiguous and by the end certainly I do not think there is anything ambiguous about it. He's pretty bad at that point. So, no Walter White?

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: Yeah it is interesting that you bring that up. And I think that in part we are sort of primed to see a comparison between Walter White and Odysseus, because I have always hated Odysseus.

CLAUDIA FILOS: Wow! That is so interesting, why?

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: And so what I think is interesting is the community's response to some of the derogatory things I have said about Odysseus, they did not want to hear it, and I have been having the same type of conversation in my classes for almost a decade now. Every time I read the text I feel less and less confident that this is a man we should be moving towards.

CLAUDIA FILOS: So that's, yeah, for me that's so exciting. It's been really helpful for me to realize that. I thought we have been whitewashing Odysseus all these years.

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: I think in the classic WB Stanford's book, *The Ulysses Theme*, one of the things he emphasizes is that everybody hated Odysseus. He's really a stage villain as he calls him in Athens, and Pindar says that famous thing where, he says that Homer lied about Odysseus, and it's hard to see even in the early classical period how we are supposed to feel about him. So when I saw *Breaking Bad*, I thought that this is a guy who's known for his intelligence. Right? and becomes defined by his own storytelling and his own craftiness and he develops and devolves over time. And it became pretty clear for me especially in the manipulation of his name and identity that he was functioning in a similar way as Odysseus. But in part he's really sort of a stand-in for audience experience about identity. So a long time ago probably the first time I taught the *Odyssey* I was really struggling with how much I didn't like Odysseus, and how dodgy he was as a character. And students as we start to compare him to say Hector in the *Iliad*, or Achilles in the *Iliad* started to agree with me. And at one point I found myself saying the following phrase. I said look, Achilles even with all his problems is the guy you want to be, but Odysseus is the person you are.

CLAUDIA FILOS: Ah!

JOEL CHRISTENSEN:.. and I think this is really important. You know if we look at the *Odyssey* in sort of a cosmic history type of thing. Where Odysseus is at the end of the race of heroes, he is the closest to being a human being. Right? and this is emphasized at the beginning of the *Odyssey* when it begins with the word *andra*. He is a man. He's not the son of a goddess he is a human being. Right, so he's dirty, he's mischievous, he's cheating he's lying, he does all of these things that human beings do to survive. And so Odysseus is the survivor. And I think that's important, and you will want to start with Walter White, that's important for Walter White in a couple ways. One: in two seasons despite, or in two years, despite the odds he's a cancer survivor right?

CLAUDIA FILOS: Yes.

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: And beyond that he is a survivor in a new way. In a world of crime and in a world of unfairness where he has been let's say marginalized to what he sees as his rightful economic accomplishment. He applies different - let's say anti-social skills to survive in a new way. [inaudible word ≈ 6:47] That's the story of Odysseus right, the skills he learns at war are not the skills that translate into normal life right? The skills you need to survive in the world, and outside the house and community are not the skills that help you to be a good husband, good father, or good leader of your people. And in the *Odyssey* we find a tremendously complex negotiation between different characteristics that is similar to what we find in *Breaking Bad*; which is really sort of this modern fantasy, right? aimed towards people who somehow feel disenfranchised.

CLAUDIA FILOS: <agrees>

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: So I think when I first watched the show one of the things that I write about, and it came out soon after - the Showtime show *Weeds*, do you guys ever watch that? and it like a fantasy about dabbling in criminal life.

CLAUDIA FILOS: Right.

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: and using extra legal means that involve your intelligence and your own personality to become something more. And I think it is a common fantasy that's been going on for a while. It's like love of gangster movies, worshipping of Scarface which is a terrible thing, - the movie is actually dreadful and the character's evil, but we vicariously live through these trickster figures. And I guess I see that in Walter White too, the transformation is the playing out of a fantasy, of being something more than what you are, of not playing by the rules. And if playing out of it [rules] we see the consequences.

CLAUDIA FILOS: Right.

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: Sorry, I went on too long.

CLAUDIA FILOS: No, no, it is not too long at all. In fact I would like to introduce a few members of our community who have joined us, so ah, actually if the people who joined while Joel started speaking can just introduce themselves that would be great.

JANET OZSOLAK: I am Janet Ozsolak, Hi.

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: Hi Janet, nice to meet you.

JANET OSZOLAK: Nice to see you too.

SARAH SCOTT: Hi! I am Sarah Scott, hello.

JACK VAUGHAN: Hello Joel and everyone, I am Jack Vaughan.

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: Hi Jack!

CLAUDIA FILOS: Awesome. So thank you so much to everyone for joining in. So ok, so now - does anyone have any questions first of all to what Joel has said? Brian?

BRIAN PRESCOTT-DECIE: I have a thought to what Joel was saying. It has always struck me that an awful lot of these heroes have a negative side to them. If you run through the list, not the most obvious ones, let's take Jason for instance the way he behaves in Corinth. Or take... vis-a vis Medea of course, or take even Romulus, the prototype hero for the Romans, a cattle thief with a bunch of gangsters, or Aeneas, the guy who ran away from Troy and so on, and so on. They all have negative aspects don't they, would you agree with that?

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: I would and this is part of what I love about Irwin Cook's article, "Active and Passive Heroics in the *Odyssey*." And that he shows that from a very [inaudible ≈ 10:10] of a hero given to him in the *Homeric Hymn to Heracles* is very clear that heroes suffer and mete out suffering. Right? So they cause pain indiscriminately. And so I think what is really think is interesting in another book by Johannes Haubold and Barbara Graziosi is this idea of cosmic history, part of what happens in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as we see the end of the race of heroes, and we get motivations

and justifications for it. Heroes, they are exceptional and they save the community, but also their exceptionality, they are dangerous and they threaten the community. And so here again we see sort of a negotiation, or exploration of both the pleasures and perils of heroes.

CLAUDIA FILOS: So, I think that one thing that is interesting about that is in the Hour 25 and HeroesX project-- we have been talking about one of Greg's ideas about heroes, which is that they are extreme in both positive and negative ways, and I think that this idea about causing suffering, and, I guess, alleviating suffering, right? Can you say that one more time about what they are doing with suffering?

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: They mete it out indiscriminately so that they bring it both to their foes and their own people, right? Achilles is the classic model of this. Heracles is an even more extreme model. And Odysseus is one whose potential to cause his own people pain is often overlooked until you go and add up how many Ithacans he killed. So this book - I don't know if you guys have seen it, this is Jonathan Shay's book, *Odysseus in America* - there are some things in which he is not a perfect reader of the epic, but there are other ways in which he does only an outsider's [inaudible 11:57] can do, which is to challenge some of the received wisdom. And he just adds up how many Ithacans die, okay? And it turns out that, you know, that there were 120 men per ship. He took twelve ships, so fourteen hundred and forty men died before he even got back to Ithaca. And then he killed 180 men when he returned! So, almost sixteen hundred Ithacans died thanks to Odysseus. And at some level, you have to wonder, can he avoid all blame whatsoever?

CLAUDIA FILOS: Right, right. And so... but that's what is so fascinating about the connections, or, the way that you are prompting us to think about a character like Walter White, because, you know, I, having been sort of--this is going to be interesting--but a Homer junkie for two decades, right? I just love it! And have been immersing myself in that kind of violence and the negativity of that hero for all these years. Somehow when I turn to Walter White, I want to have this aversion to interacting with that, right? It's so ... There is something about the idea of the genre that makes it seem more acceptable, right?

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: So Achilles slaughtering twelve Trojan youths on a pyre is okay with you?

CLAUDIA FILOS: No! Exactly! But that's it! It's not that it's okay! But somehow it's epic and it's, and that's a classy genre, right? This is a genre Do you see what I mean?

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: No, I do, I do.

CLAUDIA FILOS: Yeah, yeah. Exactly. But, so, for me, what you have done, is really help me re-think it, and really re-think the way not just that there is longing for heroes, but that we need to think about how much, umm, maybe you weren't so, maybe you're glad that that hero was absent a lot of the time. I mean, they are bad news!

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: I have been thinking about this term lately in conjunction with the *Odyssey* and *Breaking Bad*. Have you guys heard of the popular term "revenge porn"?

CLAUDIA FILOS: No!

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: Alright, well, it has been used to describe things like Quentin Tarantino's movie, *Django Unchained*, and the earlier one about Nazis, I can't remember, umm, inaudible [14:01?]. But just ...

JACK VAUGHAN: Revenge what? I didn't catch the second word.

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: Revenge porn.

JACK VAUGHAN: Porn. P-O-R-N. Oh! Okay.

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: Yeah, there you go. Sorry I am from New England and my "r"s are

JACK VAUGHAN: I didn't know that *Django Unchained* was porn, but

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: I guess it just depends what your interests are. So, but the idea of it is that it's excessive and visceral and you delight in it in an unhealthy way. Okay? So in Tarantino's violence, we know it is a delighting, an obscene delighting in violence. Right? Nobody thinks that it's healthy to enjoy this level of violence, an exploration of its limits. And I think because we have raised *The Odyssey*, on a cultural level, we have closed ourselves off to the possibility that it is also testing and transgressing boundaries in the same way. And so the parallel I see, that I really started to see--both with Shay's book and with *Breaking Bad*--is that in Book 1, we have the suitors eating all of Odysseus' food. Alright? Then in Book 8, I am sorry, 9, we have Odysseus just going into Polyphemus' house and eating all of his food, and Polyphemus starts to eat his men. In Book 23, Odysseus goes in, closes all of the exits, so that they can't escape, in the same way that his men couldn't escape, and then he slaughters everybody, right?, Because they were eating up all of his food. And that to me seems to be a clear analogy, right? The suitors are to Odysseus as Polyphemus is to Odysseus, in Book 23. And *Breaking Bad* has a similar structure in that, you know, Walter White starts off entering dangerous territory, and getting out of danger, but of course seeing death and destruction happen around him, and then at the end of the series, he becomes that death and destruction, he becomes that monster. So I think those parallels are really important.

CLAUDIA FILOS: You know, I would like to take a moment to see if there's any questions from the people who are in our discussion and also to let, ummm, we have one live viewer at the moment, we had a couple of people who came and dropped in, oh, but it looked like they just left the second I said that. I was going to invite them to the questions in the Q&A, but that's okay. So does anyone here have a question for Joel? That means you guys. Sarah, Jack ...

JACK VAUGHAN: Well, I guess my question would be why deign to compare this AMC... (I don't know if it is a sitcom or what, I haven't seen it, but saw your summaries of it and of the story line, and, I have a friend who is a writer and critic who said that what I sense about it was right on, that it is not really a high quality product.) Why not just go directly to Faust and compare *The Odyssey* with Goethe's *Faust*?

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: Well, I think that's a great point. In fact, I think that one of the missing things in a comparison between Odysseus and a Walter White figure is that intermediary post-Christian influence of Faust, and the story of Faust, which isn't really there in *The Odyssey* because the same notions of sin and righteousness aren't present in Greek society. But to the larger question of the act of comparison: I am rather open to any narrative experience inviting new revision on older texts and themes because, in part, it makes you, as an interpreter or audience member, see things in a slightly different way. So I don't always, I don't always apply the quality value judgment when deciding whether or not it is worth comparison. On the other hand, though, I would like to defend *Breaking Bad* because just viewing it from its cultural and artistic context, compared to, you know, most of the drivel on television, it is well written. Its themes are sustained, and the performances are outstanding. I think that it does present and sustain an investigative narrative and theme in a

way that is often absent from modern storytelling. And one thing that I think I talk about before you joined in, and I didn't really expand upon, is the importance of the long-duration narratives. And this is something that I have been thinking about a lot. The ancient Greeks, when they were living with the *Odyssey*, they were living with Greek myth all around them. Like Odysseus was part of their lives from when they were really young until they were really old. And so as you grow, and return to a narrative again and again, the narrative changes as you change, which I think is a crucial part of living with stories. And I think that modern television in its episodic format, because it makes you – or invites you – to engage with characters over a long time, sort of mimics the experience of that type of long-duration narrative where you change with characters, where you get to see their story unfolding, and you get to discuss what's going on in between the different episodes. It's not exactly the same, but I think it's more analogous than what we do now, which is sitting down, reading a text, and leaving it.

CLAUDIA FILOS: Hmm. Okay. So I just need to say, poor Jack, I just made a mistake, okay? I just muted you because I thought that there was background noise, so I thought that I could turn you back on, but I don't think that I can un-mute you. I am so sorry. So, if you have a follow-up statement, can you please type it into the chat bar? I am still learning how to be the "director." It never occurred to me that they wouldn't let me un-mute you again. I am so sorry.

JANET OSZOLAK: Maybe he can un-mute himself?

CLAUDIA FILOS: Can you un-mute yourself, Jack? Sorry about this technical glitch. In the meantime, maybe Sarah, while Jack is typing, maybe Sarah, you could, you look like you had a question. Oh good! Jack is on un-mute! Thank you! So sorry!

JANET OSZOLAK: Okay, I have a question. Oh, maybe he is going to follow-up. You have a follow-up, Jack?

JACK VAUGHAN: No. That's fine. You know, I can't engage on a lengthy debate concerning *Breaking Bad*, not having seen it. You know, I have some perceptions about, you know, what the moral value of the story is, which, you know, I think is kind of bad, to tell you the truth, because, you know, drugs are really the bane of American society, as ...

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: I agree with you about the message problem. But if the message problem contains any narrative when you deal with complex issues, it's unclear what the audience take-away is supposed to be. And I think the *Odyssey* presents the same problem. You know, in Book 23, are we supposed to be rooting for hanging up the handmaidens, stringing them up in the yard? I'm not convinced of that. And I think that, you know, in the ancient world, that may or may not have produced similar anxiety about the lesson that is being derived. Don't forget that one of the reasons Plato wanted Homer edited in his *Republic* is that he was worried that people were too stupid to understand the difference between allegory and straight messaging. And that's basically what Socrates says, is that you can't trust people, they are dumb, so don't give them complex messages.

CLAUDIA FILOS: So Jack, I muted you again because it sounds like there was barking in the background. So you'll un-mute.

JACK VAUGHAN: He's been excused. I'm sorry about that. Okay, well, yeah, and with Plato and *The Republic*, yes, he was very critical of Homer and the other tragedians, as he called them,

basically introducing gods as doing terrible things, planting seeds of evil in humans. That is not god-like, according to Plato's Socrates.

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: Yeah, but if you follow Socrates' comments throughout *The Republic*, he doesn't really care about that. What he cares is that people will have interpreted it wrong, right? I mean, Socrates and Plato quote Homer more than any author, like on a scale of ten to one. And it's clear from the dialogue *The Ion* that Socrates can perform Homer better than the rhapsode can, and interpret him better as well. So the flip side, I think, is that we need to measure the criticism against the, I guess, Platonic anxiety about controlling interpretation, which is something, you know, that I think that Homer [sic] himself is concerned about if you look at some, at certain parts of *The Ethics*.

JANET OSZOLAK: I have a question.

CLAUDIA FILOS: Yes, Sarah please go. I mean Janet, Janet. Sorry.

JANET OSZOLAK: If this question was already asked, I am sorry. Walt is becoming a hero as soon as he starts breaking rules, right. Even his relationship changes from the first episode on with his wife. Those heroes whom we have seen in the epics, they are not obeying the same rules as we are. When we criticize Odysseus that he killed the suitors, then we are bringing him to our morality, to our rules, but they (heroes) have separate rules and separate sets of morality, don't you agree?

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: I think it is great. There is always potential to say that what is the implication of the fact that we set up our individuals to live by different rules right. If you want to stay with Walt for a moment, from the first run of the show that his decisions corrupt everybody around him. His life in drugs ruins his wife, eventually she becomes a complacent in his crimes, ends up with death of his brother in-law. He really poisons everybody around him. I mean part of the legend in *Odyssey* is that even heroes don't exist alone, right.

CLAUDIA FILOS: So sorry. Brian, did you have a question?

BRIAN PRESCOTT-DECIE: Not a question but I have a thought on that one. Surely, the morals of the late Bronze Age, the morals of the period of Socrates, the morals of the Hellenistic era and our morals would be different and all equally would be valid in that context, no matter what they are, we are all entitled to bring our morality to the play and to the context, to the story and see how we react to it from that point of view, don't you think?

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: Absolutely, which is why when I teach or write about the *Odyssey*, what I try to do, let's say to toggle between the two different perspectives:

- 1) What are the reader's response now (even in anachronistic), what happens to us when we read the text, and
- 2) I try to weigh that against the reactions within the text, right, we might call, internal reactions or reactions of the internal audience. Which is why I think about what happens in Book 23 of the *Odyssey*, I think it is really important and critical we look at the assembly of Ithacans in Book 24 and what Odysseus, himself says in Book 23. He says, even somebody kills one man he needs to run away from his homeland, he needs to go exile, ahh, out of fear of that man's kinsman and he does not say that, these kinsmen are wrong, right. He tries to control the message and hides his actions right. So I think someone in the community, asked a nice question. I think someone named Jessica about the

eklēsis at the *Odyssey*. How the gods wipe away the memory and what it means by wiping away the memory you are wiping away the epic itself. Right, we all know Odysseus is famous for his vengeance. What is happening, gods, at the end of epic say that, we need to make everybody forget about this, right. That is the indication that something wrong has happened.

CLAUDIA FILOS: And at one point he (Odysseus) even says to Athena, he is sort of trying to figure out how they are going to kill all these people. I think he says, I am one person to kill all of them. She basically says, listen I am at your side, it is going to be OK. So what is that have, how is that change it God saying just go for it. Go for the slaughter.

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: This is one place I get little confused. I am not sure how I suppose to feel about gods, end of this, you know of course, gods are not supposed to make sense. Greeks did not expect that, but when you look at it, they seem absolutely vindictive, and I think, there is a sense that sometimes the gods are here to screw us, nothing we can do about it.

BRIAN PRESCOTT-DECIE: What is it that Antigone says: that the gods vent their own evil on humans but humans paid the price for the evil of the gods. That's something to think about.

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: That is something powerful from Sophocles, right. But you know, the epic engages with this issue from the beginning on, when Zeus looks down, he says, mortals are always blaming us for their troubles but they make their fate worse than it needs to be because of their own recklessness, right. And so this says: hey: man and God conspire together to ruin lives, you know maybe life could be a little better.

CLAUDIA FILOS: Sarah, did you have a question?

SARAH SCOTT: Yes, I was following up what you were saying about everything is going to get forgotten and so does that mean that Odysseus does not have to go into exile? And yet we know that he's going to have to leave again anyway, he's going to have to be in exile and go off with his winnowing shovel or oar or whatever? So, how does that all that fit in?

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: It is little tricky to declare that everything will be forgotten, even as we are reciting what has allegedly to be forgotten. I do not know if there is a way out of that narrative to look and part of the way, I am thinking about is that *Odyssey* is really anxious about the things, not really anxious, is really conscious about things not have closure. So there are two points in the epic where similar words related to *eklēsin* come into importance. In Book I, when Telemachus say Penelope, not to get upset about the stories of homecoming. She says the stories are giving her, I think *penthos alastov*, similarly in book iv, Menelaus says, the stories alone does not bring him pleasure, it brings him *akhos alasthon* or *alaston akhos*. In both cases, grief being called "*alasthon*" which means unforgettable, it is related to that word *lanthano*, the Greek word for that *alēthea* which means something that is not forgotten and the word *eklēsin* again at the end of the *Odyssey*. So the *Odyssey* shows that stories that don't have resolution cause excessive amounts of pain because we do not know what is going to happen, and for me this is integrated directly to the idea of fate and free will that is floated at the beginning of *Odyssey*. People both want to know stories and how it is going to end, but they also want the freedom to write their own tales. There is an essential tension there between wanting the freedom to write your own end and wanting to know that there is someone in control, wanting to know fate. I think at the end of the *Odyssey*... the *Odyssey* in an essential way does not want to give you an end. Odysseus is traveling to Phaeacia or wherever he goes is connected in part to the poetic tradition, to the mythical tradition that he

needs to go elsewhere but is also connected to *Odyssey's* poetic concern about the ending the poem. It's saying we are not going to give you a real ending, you have to provide it.

SARAH SCOTT: Just like you don't have a real beginning, you have any point of departure, you can kind of start anywhere.

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: I think not to go too far on Freudian reading of the *Odyssey*, there is a direct connection between our anxiety of the end of the tale and anxiety about death and the end of our lives. Odysseus cried when he does not know what is going to happen to him, when he loses control. But once he has control again, he just keeps going as much as if there is no lack of energy while he is still alive. And I think that the epic itself resists bringing an end to its tale, because naturally the tale translates into the real world, into life its self, and into the world of the ancient audiences. And so it leaves it open ended because it invites you not just to write the end of the *Odyssey* but to imagine new stories for your own life.

CLAUDIA FILOS: Joel that is so beautiful. I wish we can keep going but we are already gone over 30 minutes. Just want to thank you and everybody for being here.

JOEL CHRISTENSEN: Thank you for your questions. I am still going to try to answer some of your questions on the discussion board.