



# The Wages of Sin is Death: *Breaking Bad* as the New American Tragedy

## Course Syllabus -- Spoiler-Free!

**Messiah College. Fall 2015. Tuesdays, 6:15-9:15 p.m. Boyer 131.**

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### Course description

A number of serialized TV dramas over the past decade or so have led many critics to call this period “the golden age of television.” No show better epitomizes this label than *Breaking Bad*. Its thrilling plots and cliff-hangers have won it millions of viewers. But it’s more than a pop culture phenomenon. Creator Vince Gilligan’s show stands out for its novelistic structure and sensitive examination of characters’ inner lives. Even more remarkable for a television program, *Breaking Bad* provides a relentlessly honest picture of the human condition--both its vices and virtues. The show’s depictions of the seven “deadly sins” or “capital vices”--especially pride, envy, greed, and wrath--have led many viewers to recall Greek and Shakespearean tragedies. Acclaimed not only by the public but also by television and literature critics, *Breaking Bad* is uniquely well-suited among television shows for study and reflection in a classroom context.

In this course, you will take in course content (i.e. episodes of *Breaking Bad*) outside of the classroom--what’s sometimes called a “flipped classroom.” Thus, class sessions can be reserved for discussion and assimilation of this show’s many timely and important themes--including human depravity and morality, drugs, drug policy, marriage, family, friendship, masculinity, gender relations, work, vocation, money, and race.

We will view and discuss episodes of *Breaking Bad* over the course of the semester more as literature than mere entertainment. As a result, you will be prompted to engage the question: “Can watching *Breaking Bad* help you live a good life?”

Cautionary note: *Breaking Bad* contains scenes depicting violence, sexuality, and emotional tension that might be disturbing for some viewers.

### Course objectives for all interdisciplinary world view (IDWV) courses at Messiah College

By the completion of the course, students will demonstrate the ability to:

- describe the basic issues surrounding the concept of world view,
- compare and contrast a Christian world view with other world views,
- articulate different approaches to justifying one’s world view, and
- outline a variety of contemporary issues relevant to the development of a personal world view from a Christian perspective.

### Required viewing

The entire run of *Breaking Bad* (62 episodes).

### Required reading

Lewis, C. S. *Mere Christianity*. Harper, 2009. ISBN-13: 978-0060652920.

Plantinga, Cornelius. *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*. Eerdmans, 1996.

ISBN-13: 978-0802842183

*Sophocles I: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*. University of Chicago Press, 2013.

ISBN-13: 978-0226311517.

Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Penguin Classics, 2000. ISBN-13: 978-0140714784.

Online readings listed below.

### Requirements

Read all assigned readings and view all required episodes of *Breaking Bad* by the date indicated below in the schedule. Note: Two copies of all seasons of *Breaking Bad* on DVD are on reserve in Murray Library. You are encouraged to check out these DVDs and watch them--either by yourself or in a group--on the big-screen television in the Library's Murray Theater. You are also able to view all episodes of *Breaking Bad* through the usual online sources (Netflix, Amazon, Vudu, iTunes, etc.).

Write a viewing / reading quiz each class period.

Participate regularly in class—including participating in class discussions, leading class discussion on part of a book, and writing at least 3 blog posts of 300-500 words each.

Write 2 scene analyses of 800-1000 words each--the first from a scene in seasons 1-3 and the second from a scene in seasons 4-5. Focus your analysis on selected technical aspects--writing, acting, costumes, lighting, cinematography, and sound (dialogue, score, and sound effects). Scene analyses will be due on the evenings we discuss your scene. Be prepared to help lead class discussion when we address your episode's scene.

Write a compare and contrast essay of 800-1000 words on either *Breaking Bad* and Sophocles' tragedies (due Tues., Oct. 7) or *Breaking Bad* and *Macbeth* (due Tues., Nov. 4).

Write a persuasive essay of 1000-1200 words on heroes, anti-heroes, and villains in *Breaking Bad*. Choose one of the show's major characters (Walt, Skyler, Jesse, Hank, or Marie) and make the case for why this character should be viewed as some type of hero, anti-hero, or villain, or as playing some other role. Due Tues., Dec. 9.

Write a summative essay of 1000-1200 words (the take-home exam for the course) in response to the question: "Can watching *Breaking Bad* help you live a good life?" Due Tues., Dec. 16.

(Note: Student written work – blog posts, scene analyses, and essays may be posted to the website <https://studyingbreakingbadcourse.wordpress.com/> with student's permission.)

### Standard of Evaluation

Quizzes	20%
Class participation	20%
Scene analyses (2)	20%
Compare and contrast essay on <i>Breaking Bad</i> and Sophocles or <i>Macbeth</i>	10%
Persuasive essay on heroes, anti-heroes, and villains in <i>Breaking Bad</i>	15%
Summative essay on <i>Breaking Bad</i> and the good life	15%

<b>Grading scale</b>	83-86 B	70-72 C-
93-100 A	80-82 B-	67-69 D+
90-92 A-	77-79 C+	60-66 D
87-89 B+	73-76 C	< 60 F

**Some reflection /discussion questions--on readings:**

- Is television worth watching? Is television (and popular culture in general) worth studying? Is *Breaking Bad* worth watching?
- Should Christians watch television? Should they watch *Breaking Bad*?
- What's meant by "common grace"? What's your opinion about this?
- Is there any such thing as universal or transcendent morality and virtue? If so, are cultural forms (novels, movies, television shows, etc.) able to portray these things?
- What are the seven "deadly sins" or "capital vices"? In what ways do you see them in the world today? In what ways do you see them in *Breaking Bad*?
- What are the attributes of Greek tragedies? In what ways is *Breaking Bad* similar or dissimilar to Greek tragedies?
- What are the attributes of Shakespearean tragedies? In what ways is *Breaking Bad* similar or dissimilar to Shakespearean tragedies?
- What perspectives on the relationship between fate and free will have you come across?
- What are the reasons for human suffering? How should we respond to it?
- Some have compared *Breaking Bad* to works of literature beyond Greek and Shakespearean tragedies. These works include Dante's *Inferno*, versions of the Faust legend, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. If you have familiarity with any of these works, what points of connection do you see?

**Some reflection / discussion questions--on particular episodes of *Breaking Bad*:**

- What important, interesting, revealing, surprising, dramatic, or disturbing things happened in the last several episodes?
- How have the last several episodes changed your thinking about the various major characters?
- How have the last several episodes changed your thinking about where the show and its characters are heading?
- Would you describe any of the characters in the last several episodes as heroes or anti-heroes or villains? Why or why not?
- In what ways have the last several episodes illustrated the classic themes of literary conflict--man against man, man against society, man against nature, and man against self?
- What are some of the notable technical aspects--writing, acting, costuming, lighting, cinematography, and sound (dialogue, score, and sound effects)--in the last several episodes?
- What emotions did you experience in watching the last several episodes? How are you processing those emotions?

**Some reflection / discussion questions--on *Breaking Bad* in general:**

- *Breaking Bad* has been described as a show about many things--human depravity and morality, drugs, drug policy, marriage, family, friendship, masculinity, gender relations, work, vocation, money, and race, among others. In what ways do you think these various descriptions of the show are either accurate or inaccurate?
- Does *Breaking Bad* convey any moral lessons? If so, what are they?
- What is the relationship of *Breaking Bad* to various world views--including Christianity, metaphysical naturalism, and moral nihilism?
- When does Walter White "break bad"?
- Why does Walter White "break bad"?
- Is there any redemption in *Breaking Bad*? Should there be?
- Can watching *Breaking Bad* help you live a good life? Why or why not?

## SCHEDULE

(Note: Details subject to change)

### **Tues., Sept. 1 (week 1)**

**required viewing:**

Episode 101: Pilot

Episode 102: Cat's in the Bag

Episode 103: and the Bag's in the River

**required reading:**

Michael Goldberg, "Some suggestions on how to read a film"

<http://faculty.washington.edu/mlg/students/readafilm.htm>

Emily Nussbaum, "When TV Became Art," *New York Magazine* (December 2009)

<http://nymag.com/arts/all/aughts/62513/>

James Wolcott, "Prime Time's Graduation," *Vanity Fair* (May 2012)

<http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2012/05/wolcott-television-better-than-movies>

Vanessa Thorpe, "Salman Rushdie says TV dramas comparable to novels," *The Guardian* (June 11, 2011) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/12/salman-rushdie-write-tv-drama>

Thomas Doherty, "Storied TV: Cable Is the New Novel," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (September 17, 2012) <http://chronicle.com/article/Cable-Is-the-New-Novel/134420/>

David Haglund, "Stop Saying That TV Is Better Than Movies These Days," *Slate* (July 18, 2013)

[http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2013/07/stop\\_saying\\_that\\_tv\\_is\\_better\\_than\\_movies\\_these\\_days.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2013/07/stop_saying_that_tv_is_better_than_movies_these_days.html)

Eleanor Gower, "Anthony Hopkins lauds *Breaking Bad*'s Bryan Cranston via email," *The Daily Mail* (October 14, 2013) <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2460015/Anthony-Hopkins-fan-letter-Breaking-Bads-Bryan-Cranston.html>

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2460015/Anthony-Hopkins-fan-letter-Breaking-Bads-Bryan-Cranston.html>

**reference resource:**

Yale Film Studies Film Analysis Web Site <http://classes.yale.edu/film-analysis/>

### **Tues., Sept. 8 (week 2)**

**required viewing:**

Episode 104: Cancer Man

Episode 105: Gray Matter

Episode 106: Crazy Handful of Nothin'

Episode 107: A No-Rough-Stuff Type Deal

**required reading:**

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book 1 - chs. 1, 2, & 4

"", Book 2 - chs. 1-3

Matt Jenson, "Sin Happens," *Books & Culture* (July/August 2008)

Accessible online via Literature Resource Center

Tim Keller, "What Is Common Grace?"

[http://static.squarespace.com/static/53189f41e4b0ee73efed7b5a/t/533ea67ce4b05289c3da94dc/1396614780413/What\\_Is\\_Common\\_Grace.pdf](http://static.squarespace.com/static/53189f41e4b0ee73efed7b5a/t/533ea67ce4b05289c3da94dc/1396614780413/What_Is_Common_Grace.pdf)

"The Uncommon Benefits of Common Grace," *Christianity Today* 46 (July 8, 2002)

Accessible online via Academic Search Complete

"Messiah College - Engagement with Popular Culture"

[https://www.messiah.edu/offices/student\\_affairs/pop\\_culture/documents/PopCultureApr2013update.pdf](https://www.messiah.edu/offices/student_affairs/pop_culture/documents/PopCultureApr2013update.pdf)

James B. LaGrand, "*Breaking Bad* for Christians: A Morally Ordered Show," *Patheos* (October 14, 2012) <http://www.patheos.com/Evangelical/Breaking-Bad-James-LaGrand-10-15-2012.html>

**Tues., Sept. 15 (week 3)****required viewing:**

Episode 201: Seven Thirty-Seven

Episode 202: Grilled

Episode 203: Bit by a Dead Bee

Episode 204: Down

**required reading:**

Proverbs 6:16-19 <http://www.esvbible.org/Proverbs+6%3A16-19/>

Galatians 5:16-26 <http://www.esvbible.org/Galatians+5%3A16-26/>

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book 3 - chs. 1, 8-10

Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, introduction & ch. 1

**Tues., Sept. 22 (week 4)****required viewing:**

Episode 205: Breakage

Episode 206: Peekaboo

Episode 207: Negro Y Azul

Episode 208: Better Call Saul

**required reading:**

Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, chs. 2-4

Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, chs. 5-7

David Segal, "The Dark Art of *Breaking Bad*," *New York Times Magazine* (July 6, 2011)

[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/10/magazine/the-dark-art-of-breaking-bad.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/10/magazine/the-dark-art-of-breaking-bad.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

"Q&A - Michael Slovis (Director of Photography)"

<http://blogs.amctv.com/breaking-bad/2009/04/michael-slovis-interview-3/>

"Q&A - Dave Porter (Composer) and Thomas Golubić (Music Supervisor)"

<http://blogs.amctv.com/breaking-bad/2010/05/dave-porter-thomas-golubic-interview/>

Josh Gajewski, "*Breaking Bad* crosses into narcocorrido territory," *Los Angeles Times* (April 20, 2009) <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/apr/20/entertainment/et-narco-corrado20>

**Tues., Sept. 29 (week 5)****required viewing:**

Episode 209: 4 Days Out

Episode 210: Over

Episode 211: Mandala

Episode 212: Phoenix

Episode 213: ABQ

**required reading:**

Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, ch. 8

**Tues., Oct. 6 (week 6)****due:**

Compare and contrast essay on *Breaking Bad* and Sophocles' tragedies

**required viewing:**

Episode 301: No Más

Episode 302: Caballo Sin Nombre

Episode 303: I.F.T.

Episode 304: Green Light

Episode 305: Mas

**required reading:**

L. Kip Wheeler, "Some Thoughts About Tragedy (Both Literary and Mundane)"

<https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Tragedy.pdf>

David Simpson, "Comedy and Tragedy" <http://condor.depaul.edu/dsimpson/tlove/comic-tragic.html>

Sophocles, introductions, *Antigone* (pp. 1-70)

**Tues., Oct. 13 (week 7)****required viewing:**

Episode 306: Sunset

Episode 307: One Minute

Episode 308: I See You

Episode 309: Kafkaesque

Episode 310: Fly

**required reading:**

Sophocles, *Oedipus the King* (pp. 71-142)

**Tues., Oct. 20 (week 8)****required viewing:**

Episode 311: Abiquiu

Episode 312: Half Measures

Episode 313: Full Measure

Episode 401: Box Cutter

Episode 402: Thirty-Eight Snub

**required reading:**

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Acts 1-2.

**Tues., Oct. 27 (week 9)****required viewing:**

Episode 403: Open House

Episode 404: Bullet Points

Episode 405: Shotgun

Episode 406: Cornered

Episode 407: Problem Dog

**required reading:**

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 3.

**Tues., Nov. 3 (week 10)****due:**

Compare and contrast essay on *Breaking Bad* and Macbeth

**required viewing:**

Episode 408: Hermanos

Episode 409: Bug

Episode 410: Salud

Episode 411: Crawl Space

Episode 412: End Times

Episode 413: Face Off

**required reading:**

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Acts 4-5.

**Tues., Nov. 10 (week 11)****required viewing:**

Episode 501: Live Free or Die

Episode 502: Madrigal

Episode 503: Hazard Pay

Episode 504: Fifty-One

Episode 505: Dead Freight

Episode 506: Buyout

**required reading:**

Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, chs. 9-10

**Tues., Nov. 17 (week 12)****required viewing:**

Episode 507: Say My Name

Episode 508: Gliding All Over

Episode 509: Blood Money

Episode 510: Buried

Episode 511: Confessions

**required reading:**

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book 4 - chs. 1, 7-11

**Thanksgiving Recess (week 13)**

[No class meeting.]

**Tues., Dec. 1 (week 14)****required viewing:**

Episode 512: Rabid Dog

Episode 513: To'hajiilee

Episode 514: Ozymandias

Episode 515: Granite State

Episode 516: Felina

**Tues., Dec. 8 (week 15)****due:**

Persuasive essay on heroes, anti-heroes, and villains in *Breaking Bad*

**required reading:**

Elias Schwartz, "The Possibilities of Christian Tragedy," *College English* 21 (January 1960): 208-213. Accessible online via JStor.

Paul Elie, "Has Fiction Lost Its Faith?" *New York Times* (December 19, 2012)

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/23/books/review/has-fiction-lost-its-faith.html>

Michelle Kuo and Albert Wu, "In Hell, We Shall Be Free: On *Breaking Bad*," *Los Angeles Review of Books* (July 13, 2012) <http://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/in-hell-we-shall-be-free-on-breaking-bad/>

Jackson Cuidon, "Why We Need *Breaking Bad*," *Christianity Today* (July 2, 2013)

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/july-web-only/breaking-bad.html>

David Zahl, "The Frightening—But Biblical—Moral Logic of *Breaking Bad*," *Christianity Today* (August 9, 2013) <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/july-august/breaking-bad-moral-logic.html?paging=off>

**Tues., Dec. 15 (exam week)****due:**

Essay in response to the question: "Can watching *Breaking Bad* help you live a good life?"



### **Appendix: DVDs on reserve at Murray Library**

- Breaking Bad*, The Complete First Season (2 copies). PN1992.77 .B74 Season 1.  
*Breaking Bad*, The Complete Second Season (2 copies). PN1992.77 .B74 Season 2.  
*Breaking Bad*, The Complete Third Season (2 copies). PN1992.77 .B74 Season 3.  
*Breaking Bad*, The Complete Fourth Season (2 copies). PN1992.77 .B74 Season 4.  
*Breaking Bad*, The Complete Fifth Season (2 copies). PN1992.77 .B74 Season 5.  
*Breaking Bad*, The Final Season (2 copies). PN1992.77 .B74 Season 5 pt. 2.

### **Appendix: Books on reserve at Murray Library**

- Easterling, P. E., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997. PA3131 .E28 1997.  
Hall, Edith. *Greek Tragedy: Suffering under the Sun*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. PA3131 .H35 2010.  
Zimmermann, Bernhard. *Greek Tragedy: An Introduction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991. PA3131 .Z513 1991.  
Hogan, James C. *A Commentary on the Plays of Sophocles*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991. PA4417 .H64 1991.  
Coursen, Herbert R. *Macbeth: A Guide to the Play*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997. PR2823 .C67 1997  
Bloom, Harold, ed. *William Shakespeare's Macbeth*. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2010. PR2823 .W48 1996eb (e-book).  
de Grazia, Margreta and Stanley Wells, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. PR2894 .C33 2001.  
Straczynski, J. Michael. *The Complete Book of Scriptwriting*. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1996. PN1661 .S75 1996.  
Epstein, Alex. *Crafty TV Writing: Thinking Inside the Box*. New York: Holt, 2006. PN1992.7 .E67 2006.  
Goldberg, Lee and William Rabkin. *Successful Television Writing*. Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2003. PN1992.7 .G625 2003.  
Sandler, Ellen. *The TV Writer's Workbook: A Creative Approach To Television Scripts*. New York: Bantam Dell, 2007. PN1992.7 .S35 2007.  
Atwood, Blake. *The Gospel According to Breaking Bad*. AtWords Press, 2013. PN1992.77.B74 A89 2013x.  
Pierson, David P. *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays on the Contexts, Politics, Style, and Reception of the Television Series*. Lexington Books, 2013. PN1992.77.B74 B739 2013.  
Guffey, Ensley F. and K. Dale Koontz. *Wanna Cook?: The Complete, Unofficial Companion to Breaking Bad*. ECW Press, 2014. PN1992.77.B74 G84 2014x.  
Martin, Brett. *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution: From The Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad*. New York: Penguin Press, 2013. PN1992.8.S4 M2655 2013.  
Seger, Linda. *The Art of Adaptation: Turning Fact and Fiction into Film*. New York: Holt, 1992. PN1997.85 .S44 1992.  
Campbell, Drew. *Technical Film and TV for Nontechnical People*. New York: Allworth Press, 2002. PN1995.9.P7 C32 2002eb (e-book).  
Vale, Eugene. *Vale's Technique of Screen And Television Writing*. Boston: Focal Press, 1998. PN1996 .V27 1998.  
Arijon, Daniel. *Grammar of the Film Language*. Los Angeles: Silman-James, 1991. TR850 .A8 1991.