Course Syllabus -- Spoiler-Free!

Instructor: James B. LaGrand
Office: Boyer 264
Telephone: ext. 7381

Email: JLaGrand@ messiah.edu
Office hours: Mondays, Wednesdays, & Fridays, 11-noon; Thursdays, 3-4 p.m.; & by appointment

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:

a. describe the basic issues surrounding the concept of world view,
b. compare and contrast a Christian world view with other world views,
c. articulate different approaches to justifying one’s world view, and
d. 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**
*Sophocles I: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus.* University of Chicago Press, 2013.

**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/](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 *Breaking Bad* and Sophocles or Macbeth | 10% |
| Persuasive essay on heroes, anti-heroes, and villains in *Breaking Bad* | 15% |
| Summative essay on *Breaking Bad* and the good life | 15% |

**Grading scale**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A+</td>
<td>93-100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>90-92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>87-89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>83-86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>80-82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>77-79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>73-76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>70-72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D+</td>
<td>67-69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>60-66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D-</td>
<td>&lt; 60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Note: Grades are based on the average of the final percentage obtained in each category.)
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
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
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
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
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
Accessible online via Academic Search Complete
“Messiah College - Engagement with Popular Culture”
https://www.messiah.edu/offices/student_affairs/pop_culture/documents/PopCultureApr2013update.pdf
**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:**
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

**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
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](https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Tragedy.pdf)
- Sophocles, introductions, *Antigone* (pp. 1-70)

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)

required viewing:
- Episode 311: Abiquiu
- Episode 312: Half Measures
- Episode 313: Full Measure
- Episode 401: Box Cutter
- Episode 402: Thirty-Eight Snub

required reading:

required viewing:
- Episode 403: Open House
- Episode 404: Bullet Points
- Episode 405: Shotgun
- Episode 406: Cornered
- Episode 407: Problem Dog

required reading:
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:

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:**

**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


---

Appendix: Books on reserve at Murray Library


