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Breaking Myths:
A monomyth analysis of *Breaking Bad*.

Treball de Fi de Grau

Grau d'Estudis d'Anglès i Espanyol

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1. Introduction: a working definition of monomyth

Before attempting an analysis of *Breaking Bad* (BB) from a monomyth perspective, it is important to set up the theoretical background for the monomyth itself. The variation and debate surrounding the monomyth is so great that boundaries need to be set, and choices need to be made, in order to continue.

The monomyth is known to most scholars of literary theory, specially to Comparative Literature scholars in the 1960s, as the generalist theory designed by Joseph Campbell through his work on James Joyce (Campbell, 1994:3) during the early twentieth century. From here, Campbell wrote *The Hero with a Thousand Masks* (1949).

Within the monomyth theory, all folklore and popular literature is woven into a single tapestry. All texts share the same tropes (e.g. The Wayward Son, The Good Kingdom, The Rebirth) end up producing similar myths and folk stories across cultures.

Although Campbell's work has been heavily criticised by his peers in the later part of the twentieth century, the monomyth theory sparked a strong interest in comparative mythology in popular culture that has influenced works such as *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, *The Lion King* (Seastrom). It is not a stretch to say that any text conceived for television or cinema in the last fifty years has been somewhat influenced by the success of the monomyth theory. As this project will discuss later, BB was conceived directly in opposition to «the stasis world» in which television shows exist (Gilligan: 2007: 5'59") so studying a deliberately anti-TV-trope show from a very TV- tropesque place can prove very fruitful for modern academic discourse.

The base definition of monomyth from which this project stems is best quoted directly from Campbell's work:

The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation—initiation—return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth (Campbell, 2003: 28)

This project understands the monomyth as an all-encompassing structure that runs through the great majority of texts in tradition and is characterised by a departure, a voyage with trials, and the return of a hero.

Within the monomyth, the hero is the paragon of humanity, a greater version of ourselves whose worldview tracks closely with the psyche of their generation. In order to become a hero, a character must depart from the sensible world on a journey of internal transfiguration, mirroring their external voyage, where they will encounter strange situations and people that will define their destiny as heroes.

2. Methodology

During the planning of this project, four distinct variables arose that required a methodology decision: The selection of the primary source, the analysis of BB as a single Hero's journey or a collection of journeys, the criteria of what constituted a modern monomyth, and the process by which the primary source would interact with Campbell's work and the critics of his work thereafter.

This section of the project explains the decisions that were made and the guidelines by which it abides. Some of these decisions were taken after completing the project or encountering an obstacle in the methodology. They are criteria selected after careful consideration, trial and error, and the discovery process throughout the project.

On the first variable, it was clear from the beginning that there were two ways to read BB as a text: from dialogue transcriptions of the AMC release or from the original script written by Vince Gilligan. The first would imply that only the spoken interventions of characters and their actions on screen would dictate the content of the text, everything else would be peritextual and therefore not a primary source. The second option, on the other hand, would include notes to the actors and stage/set directions as part of the text, but would exclude scene improvisations that made it to the final release of the show.

In reading *The Hero with a Thousand Masks* (2003), it was clear that Campbell thought of the monomyth as an overarching structure that surrounded everything beyond the text itself.

Therefore, it felt limiting to only consider the show's screening as the complete version of the text. In keeping with his original version of the monomyth, all the references and citations of the primary source on this project were originally sourced from an original script copy. However, attempts to obtain a traceable, registered copy of the script that could be cited for scholarly research of all episodes of the show have failed.

This project uses instead direct quotations, with character, location and sound queues for hearing-impaired viewers, from the episodes as collected directly from the Netflix-released episodes and some recovered full scripts of "Pilot" and "Más".

On the second variable, BB can be understood as a complete story from seasons one through five or as a compilation of five story arcs into two encompassing stories: The first Journey of Walter White and the second Journey of Heisenberg. Despite the main characters and tropes remaining largely the same in both perspectives, BB has a multifaceted story arc that resets itself with the ebbing of each season. These "soft returns", as I decided to call them for reasons explained further on, could be ignored in favour of the greater story: there is no Refusal to the Call as strong as the one in season two, so there is an argument for ignoring all other minor instances of this trope. This project considers BB a single Journey.

Although BB is similar to other monomyth stories such as the Aeneid in its episodic structure, BB was designed and planned to have smaller, self-contained arcs within itself that are paced seasonally. Additionally, any TV show in the 21st century is directly or indirectly a reaction upon the monomyth tropes and cannot be viewed innocently. How can a literary theory be reconciled with a TV show?

Here is where the third and fourth variables come into play; this project analyses BB as a double journey from a traditional monomyth point of view while also making note of the inconsistencies and criticism within and outside the monomyth. I have compiled a short section of the major criticisms that the monomyth theory has received. Then, I have analysed BB from a traditional monomyth perspective in keeping with variable two. Lastly, any discrepancies and nuances that are beyond our working definition of monomyth are exposed and a revised version of the theory is suggested.

3. The monomyth in Literary Criticism: The Good, the Bad, the Ugly.

Whenever a holistic theory of understanding literature appears, criticism and scrutiny are quick to follow. Campbell's work is the most popular in a long list of generalist theories that try to mesh folklore, mythology and culture into one big melting pot. Claude Levi-Strauss' structural anthropology and James George Frazer's Life-and-Death cycles of theogony and mythology are clear examples of likeminded theories that have not stood the test of time. This section of the project attempts to sum up the evolution of monomyth as viewed by scholars, the public and the current state of affairs in the topic that concerns us: antiheroes.

From a purely hermeneutic perspective, the monomyth enjoyed a few decades in the spotlight, thanks to scholars such as Northrop Frye, who were using Campbell's approach to teach mythology in their classrooms. Soon thereafter, as is the case with Phillips' *The monomyth and Literary Criticism* (1975), every undergraduate thesis on comparative literature was being written through the Hero's Journey lens. Most notable among these works are Donald Palumbo's series of articles on almost every piece of science fiction media of the late twentieth century.

However, folklorist Robert Elwood promptly criticized Campbell's "oversimplification of historical matters and tendency to make myth mean whatever he wanted it to mean" (Elwood, 1999: 131-132). The monomyth was labelled by scholars as a gullible, reductionist and myopic to the understanding and diversity of mythology. Arguably, Campbell's success in pandering to laymen—added to his decision to publish his work outside of academic circles—earned him further disapproval. Most recently, folklorist Alan Dundes offered this criticism of the monomyth:

Campbell does not really know what a myth is [...] archetype? I believe there is no single idea promulgated by amateurs that has done more harm to serious folklore study than the notion of archetype. I find it invariably cited by ignorant students, as well as equally uninformed members of the general public (Dundes, 2004:397)

From a gender perspective, the monomyth has been assailed for its insufficiency to acknowledge women as heroes; often assuming that female figures are embedded into the male ethos of the myth, Campbell's Journey, according to Katherine Pope and Carol Pearson, is self-limiting:

the hero may be either male or female[...] then proceeds to discuss the heroic pattern as male[...] the male hero from Homer to Hemingway [according to Campbell] often demonstrate his heroic power by killing or dominating others; but it is not accurate to assume that this macho ideal is *the* [sic] archetypal human pattern. (Pope and Pearson, 1981:4)

From an understanding of this nuanced perspective, the body of work of many authors has been revisited in media and spun off myths of its own. Women, as Nicholson starkly puts it, are always at the behest of men and «even when theorists deigned to extend the potential prerogative of heroism to woman, their nod would more often than not subsume woman as subtext, a bracketed subspecies of the category Man» (Nicholson, 2011: 187). While the field of Women's Literature and the mythology of women advanced, scholars stayed behind.

Unlike the scholarly field, authors had an immediate reaction to the emerging presence of women in the monomyth: while female tropes and feminist writing of female heroes had long existed in prose since the First Wave, comic strips and graphic novels became some of the first texts aware of the double standards in attire, demeanour and decorum of female heroes.

Perhaps the most iconic of which is the work of Alison Bechdel, who in 1985 introduced the concept of the Bechdel-Wallace test, a plot device to measure the integrity of a female character as a standalone person or an attaché of the male psyche.

It seems like the biggest gripe that scholars have with the monomyth is its misrepresentation of broader, more nuanced areas of literature. As Campbell himself had done throughout his publications, Clarissa Pinkola Estés comes forward to placate sexist readings of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2004); she writes in her preface to the commemorative edition:

Some think that certain symbols stand only for women, and certain other symbols, especially those found in mythos, stand only for men. But, at bottom, all represent forces of immense creative energy within any psyche. [...]In mythos, the heroic attributes belong to both feminine and masculine, both to men and to women. Perhaps it should be said that the drive to live out stories is as deep in the psyche, when awakened,

as it is compelling to the psyche to listen to stories and to learn from them.[...] Thus an individual of any gender can become entranced by and learn from the mythic figure [...] (Pinkola Estés, 2004: 23 Prologue)

The validity of the monomyth is still debated to this day. A brilliant example of it can be found on Sarah Nicholson's *The Problem of Woman as a Hero in the Work of Joseph Campbell* (2014), a paper that modernizes the discussion while encapsulating previously cited works:

The depth of the confused gender dynamics of Campbell's heroic outline is deeper than Pearson and Pope's statement might suggest. Campbell's use of gender-inclusive language is conscious and deliberate, and as Segal points out, in illustrating the journey he 'enlists myths of female heroes as often as those of male ones' (Segal, 2004: 14) and In Campbell's dissection of mythology, woman as hero is lost to the greater symbolic Woman (Nicholson, 2014: 191)

Unlike harsher critics, Nicholson bird's eye view does give Campbell's renewed position some credit:

For women seeking symbolic representation of themselves as hero, Campbell insistence that mythology must 'live', renewed in each age, provides hope. (192)

While it would be unwise to dismiss the concerns raised up to this point, none of them threaten the purpose of this project and serve only to lay a framework of the progress made in measuring the potential of the monomyth. Thanks to Christopher Vogler's adaptation, the monomyth has become a myth of its own. It has grown and shapeshifted from a theory of literature into a manual required to make profitable TV fiction. As with every convention, however, the authors and the readers constantly adjust their expectations and even Vogler himself is starting to see the tides turn for the monomyth:

Young people perceive the world as reflections in a shattered mirror, [...] They are accustomed to juggling story lines, time periods, and genres [...] Because of the archival nature of television, constantly churning images and eras, post-modern kids live in a stew of styles[...] They master the idioms and attitudes of all these options and more. On their interactive, multi-media computers, they are comfortable with randomly sampling bits of entertainment and information without concern for the old world's notions of time and sequence. (Vogler, 2007: 266-267)

At this point the debate has reached a stalemate. The antihero seems to be the only viable, original route left to pursue if we are to innovate at all. Unsurprisingly, other authors have already begun analysing the tension between antiheroic figures and the pulp/pop culture mass-production system. Dan Curley's excellent chapter in *Epic Heroes on Screen* (2018) casts a spotlight to this project's core issue:

Antiheroic films will work to disrupt these systems. This is not to say that the outcomes are never heroic from the standpoint of achieving victories or accomplishing great tasks. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2004) is focused perhaps less on canon-formation, though Greco-Roman case studies are prominent, than on fitting diverse traditions into a timeless and tidy pattern. (Curley, 2018: 176)

Overall, this section has put forward a stronger argument for analysing BB from a monomyth's perspective. Most of the bibliography on the topic is over 60 years old and the most recent studies are compilatory or focused on the viability of the outdated archetype against a newer audience. It is paramount that this project focuses on departing from these debates.

4. Hypothesis and challenges

Prior to starting the project, the most problematic aspect of studying BB is its sprawling size and plot intricacies. The show was designed to be non-linear and the characters are constantly evolving. As such, I expect that some concessions will have to be made in terms of summarising the Journey or defining the characters in tropes or archetypes.

Despite there being no specific intent beyond an analysis of BB from a monomyth perspective, it would be interesting to see if Vogler's adaptation of the monomyth has overcome its limitations. My initial hypothesis is that BB will stand by a monomyth reading far beyond a generalist approach. I expect to find two journeys with several smaller plots nestled within them.

5. Monomyth Archetypes in *Breaking Bad*

Now that we have correctly situated BB in the context of the monomyth, we can analyse its characters according to the archetypes laid down by Campbell. More specifically, the archetypes summarized in the guidebook *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (2007) by Stephen Vogler, as it has become a staple for compelling storywriting in modern television and cinema.¹

Breaking Bad is, conceptually, the story of Walter White. A middle-aged chemistry teacher that decides to cook methamphetamine to leave money for his son and unborn daughter when he is told that he has a terminal form of cancer and has two years to live. In practice, the story follows three characters: the recovering addict, high school dropout Jesse Pinkman on his strange coming-of-age (or “of hero” as it will be discussed further) tale; the hardnosed tough-on-the-outside, macho by day, broken man by night DEA agent Hank Schrader; and the transformation of Walter White into Heisenberg, a drug kingpin.

5.1 Heroes

Simply stated, an Anti-hero is not the opposite of a Hero, but a specialized kind of Hero, one who may be an outlaw or a villain [...] but with whom the audience is basically in sympathy (Vogler, 2007: 34-35)

Usually the easiest archetype to assign, the Hero is BB's most problematic role. From a narrative standpoint, Walter White is the hero of his own story: an antihero at heart that represents the common, downtrodden man in his quest to provide for his family before he dies. Walter's journey disconnects him from the audience and motivates the rise of two other heroes: Jesse as an example of the scoundrel or trickster hero and Hank as a classic archetype of a true hero.

People commonly think of Heroes as strong or brave, but these qualities are secondary to sacrifice — the true mark of a Hero. (32)

¹ This Project considers the history of US television as divided in three Golden Ages: The boom of the 50s and 60s short form, episodic television shows in the US (*The Twilight Zone*), the Golden Age of Reality Television and Sitcoms 1980-1999 (*Friends*, *Seinfeld*) and the third Golden Age, a resurgence of the long form antihero series that have become the current cultural phenomenon (*Dexter*, *Hannibal*, *Sherlock*, *The Wire*, *Prison Break*...) to which *Breaking Bad* belongs. An article on the matter: Reese, Hope. “Why Is the Golden Age of TV So Dark?” *The Atlantic*: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/07/why-is-the-golden-age-of-tv-so-dark/277696/> Accessed 26th May 2020.

Hank takes on the call to adventure at the end of season 1 and is not recognized by the audience as such until his musings to Marie over the meaning of the word hero:

HANK (to MARIE): I think the universe is trying to tell me something, and I'm finally...ready to listen. I'm just not the man I thought I was. I think I'm done as a cop. ("Negro y Azul", Breaking Bad: s3, e7)

From that point on, Hank ceases to be the pestering brother-in-law that gets in the way of Walter's story. His journey is about self-discovery (his limitations as a macho cop), duty and unwilling sacrifice in the face of the unspeakable evil that is Heisenberg.

Hank experiences all the tropes from the Hero's Journey: he refuses the call, has a meeting with the supernatural ("Tortuga") that introduces him to the Unknown World, faces multiple Threshold Guardians (Tucó, the Salamanca Brothers), experiences two Resurrections as a result of his injuries that reshape his personality and duties as a hero, and a Revelation when he discovers Walter's secret identity as Heisenberg. Even his sacrificial death ("Felina") enshrines his character as an archetypal hero.

Jesse's journey, on the contrary, is that of the unlikely hero. A character marked by self-loathing, drug abuse and loyalty. His initial motivations for adventure are base but as Walter's journey sours, Jesse becomes the moral compass for the viewer and his experiences enhance Walter as a Shadow. Mike and Gus often point out, somewhat ironically given his origins as a petty criminal, that Jesse does not belong in the world of crime ("Thirty-Eight Snub") and his loyalty to Walter will be his downfall ("Kafkaesque"). From a gender perspective, Jesse has a much more nuanced relationship with the female characters of the show. They are not externalisations of his Jungian female psyche exclusively, but rather fully fleshed out characters that highlight how vulnerable Jesse is in comparison to both Hank and Walter.

Jesse's "soft returns", the false Returns to the Ordinary World that are prompted by the structure of the show, are always dictated by other characters, as he would much rather never return to the Unknown World. He is the only main character that experiences a true return to the Ordinary World in "Felina", a return that is further developed in *El Camino* (2019) when Skinny tells Jesse he is «his hero».

Hank and Jesse have to become heroes because the Journey that started with Walter, a relatable antihero turned into Shadow when he transforms into Heisenberg, cannot survive without

the traditional hero archetype. Walter attempts a redemption in the eyes of the audience by relinquishing power, giving his money away and attempting to right his wrongs by saving Jesse (“Felina”). Yet his death is not sacrificial or noble, his legacy in *El Camino* is that of a Shadow and his final stance on his deeds is one of pride.

Walter is not a Hero, antihero or Shadow, at least not fully. In a later section this project will attempt to reconcile these truths with the monomyth.

5.2 Shapeshifters

Shapeshifters change appearance or mood, and are difficult for the hero and the audience to pin down. They may mislead the hero or keep her [sic] guessing, and their loyalty or sincerity is often in question [...] an important psychological purpose of the Shapeshifter archetype is to express [...] the corresponding female element in the male unconscious. (Vogler, 2007: 60)

Shapeshifters are the driving force of BB. Their role in the development of the Journey strengthens the duplicity and malleability of its characters. While their actions are not mentioned later in section 6, because they are not Heroes, it is important to relate here how they influence the Heroes to change.

Marie, Skyler, Jane and Andrea are Shapeshifters during the first 4 seasons of the show. They are often Allies to some heroes and Enemies to others, often acting as temporary Threshold Guardians or Mentors when the situation arises. Gale Boetticher can be categorised as a Shapeshifter, as he provokes the main conflict in season 3 by switching from Ally to Threshold Guardian to Ordeal and drives a wedge between Jesse and Walter. However, the most important part of a Shapeshifter is agency, their will to beguile or intimidate others into doing what they want. Gale just does as he is told and has no agency.

Marie manifests Hank’s insecurities and frailties outwards by dealing with kleptomania (“Seven Thirty-Seven”, “Open House”); she also projects his resolve and commitment to duty by taking active action in getting other characters to safety (“End Times”, “Confessions”). She stands by Walt’s morally questionable decisions (his gambling and marijuana use) but frowns upon Skyler’s faults (his affair with Ted Beneke, the divorce). In the last season of the show, her allegiance to Walter and Skyler ends. Marie is an example of a classic Jungian Shapeshifter, fully embracing the misogynistic nature of the trope.

Jane and Andrea represent two essential stages in Jesse's development as a Hero. Jane beguiles Jesse into taking drugs and antagonizing Walter. Her attempts at blackmailing Walter and eloping with Jesse ("Phoenix") cause her demise, and with it departs Jesse's blind trust in his partner. Jane becomes the linchpin that cements Walter as a future Shadow in "Ozymandias".

Andrea, on the other hand, redeems Jesse as a Hero to the audience. She is initially corrupted by Jesse ("Abiquiu") but manages to project his humanity as she introduces him to Brock and Tomás. When Tomás dies at Gus' request, it makes Jesse's revenge righteous in the eyes of the viewer; when Brock is poisoned, it motivates Jesse to kill Gus and to betray Walter once he finds out he was behind the ploy all along ("Confessions"). Andrea's death in "Granite State" represents the disappearance of the Elixir from BB. There is no redemption for these characters.

Skyler is a much more complicated Shapeshifter, her role in the Journey is paramount and her decision making often contradicts the archetype. Throughout season 1, Skyler is supportive and empathetic towards Walter, she embodies the concept of family that Walter uses to justify his criminal activities.

As the plot unravels, Skyler becomes the Bearer of Life (through the birth of Holly in "Mandala"), the Keeper of the Key (by aiding Walter in his enterprise in "Kafkaesque" and "Bullet Points") and the Threshold between the Ordeal and the Reward: she wards and administers the money ("Open House"), protects the children by divorcing Walter ("No Más") or by sending them off to Marie and Hank ("Fifty-One") or even uses them as a bargaining chip to get Walter to do what she wants ("Rabid Dog"). She also has several episodes almost entirely devoted to her own Journey, which will be discussed in section 7.

In season 5, Todd and Lydia are introduced as the last Shapeshifters and are ultimately responsible for Walter's fall from grace. Todd is introduced to the show as an ally in "Dead Freight", quickly becomes a Threshold Guardian by killing the boy, turns back into an ally as Walter's cook assistant in "Say My Name" and a hitman in "To'hajiilee", becomes an enemy in "Buried" by betraying Walter for the Aryan Brotherhood and turns into the last Shadow by kidnapping Jesse, killing Andrea and stealing Walter's money ("Ozymandias").

Lydia first appears in "Madrigal" and quickly manipulates all characters into allowing her to survive and use her resources in their enterprise. Despite her attempts to betray Mike and Walter

twice, Lydia escapes every dangerous situation by leveraging items and information (“Dead Freight”) to her credit. She becomes a pivotal character in Walter’s empire and manipulates him to sever ties with all other allies (“Gliding Over All”).

She is later discarded by Walter (thanks to Skyler’s influence) in “Blood Money” when she attempts to lure him into cooking again. Lydia triggers the Ordeal that ends the Journey of Hank, starts the false Resurrection of Walter as a Hero and prepares the Return to the Ordinary World for Jesse.

5.3 Trickster

The Third Golden Age of television either uses the Trickster strictly as comedic relief or as a device to enhance the trope of the Shadow (Moriarty in *Sherlock* (2013)). Trickster Shadows are usually maniacally insane geniuses that derive pleasure from toying with the Heroes and committing evil acts at random.

The only recurrent Trickster in the show is Walter Jr./Flynn. While many characters are initially introduced as such, Walter Jr. only provides tension relief. Some notable examples are his vomiting in the pool during Walter and Hank’s first faceoff (“Over”), the purchase of the Camaro in “Cornered” and his insistence to be called by his self-given nickname Flynn throughout the show, as an act of teenage rebellion.

This is mostly due to the dilution of the Trickster trope into the Shadow trope in contemporary literature. Tricksters are originally an iconic part of the monomyth, as many deities and powerful beings are playful and conniving in ancient mythology and theology. Examples of true Tricksters are Loki (from Norse mythology), Elegua (from the Yoruba tribes) or the Sphinx (*Oedipus Rex*); these characters have intentions that are neither good nor evil, merely chaotic in nature.

5.4 Threshold Guardian

Threshold Guardians are usually not the main villains or antagonist in stories. Often [...] lieutenants of the villain [...] they may also be neutral figures [...] or secret helpers. [...] Testing of the hero is the primary dramatic function of the Threshold Guardian (Vogler, 2007: 49-50)

There are many characters that fit this archetype temporarily. The Threshold Guardian is often unimportant in BB's narrative due to the intrinsically confrontational nature of the show ("Interview", Gilligan: 5'53"). Regardless, the most consistent man-in-the-middle character that can only fit this archetype is Mike.

Mike is introduced to the audience as Saul's secret helper in "ABQ". He diverts the Salamanca brothers' hit on Walter in season 3, killing one of them and many other cartel members at Gus' request. Mike first antagonises Walter in "Full Measures" by preventing him from leaving the lab and following orders to murder him and Jesse. Walter tricks Mike and overcomes his Threshold but is later confronted in "Thirty-Eight Snub" when Mike punches him for suggesting a hit on Gus and declares:

MIKE (to WALT): Do yourself a favour and learn to take yes for an answer. ("Thirty-Eight Snub", *Breaking Bad*: s4, e2)

As events progress, Mike develops a distaste for Walter and a soft spot for Jesse. This stance serves as the main plot later in season 5 when Mike becomes their business partner and is often the wedge that drives them apart; Mike rejects most of Walter's brute handed solutions and protects Jesse's interests, foretelling:

MIKE (to WALT): You are a time bomb (GESTURES TO WALT'S CHEST), tick, tick. Ticking, and I have no intention of being around for the boom [...]

---: When I'm out, I'm out.

JESSE (to MIKE): I'm out too, Mike.

MIKE (low, to JESSE): Kid, just look out for yourself.
("Buyout" and "Say My Name", *Breaking Bad*: s5 e6-7)

Mike's Threshold is overcome by Walter, he impulsively murders him for revealing the reason the entire operation went awry:

MIKE (yelling to WALT): You could've shut your mouth...cooked and made as much money as you ever needed. It was perfect. But, no, you just had to blow it up. You and your pride and your ego! (MOTIONS TO THE SIDES WITH BOTH ARMS) You just had to be the man. If you'd done your job, known your place...we'd all be fine right now. ("Say My Name", *Breaking Bad*: s5 e6-7)

5.5 Mentors

Mentors provide heroes with motivation, inspiration, guidance, training, and gifts for the Journey. Every hero is guided by something, and a story without some acknowledgement of this energy is incomplete. [...]the Mentor or donor is not a rigid character type [...] A character primarily manifesting one archetype—the hero, the shapeshifter, the trickster, even the villain—may temporarily slip on the mask of the Mentor in order to teach or give something to the hero. (Vogler, 2007: 46)

There are three types of Mentors in BB's Journeys: Saul as the Comic Mentor, Walter as the Fake Mentor, and Gus and Mike as the Wise Old Men. Though all of them fit the archetype very loosely, their role as such dictates the ebbing of the "soft returns" that will later be explained.

During the entirety of season 1, Walter acts as a Fake Mentor to Jesse, teaching him chemistry and attempting to curb his impulsive behaviour. Although his initial intentions are good, Walter uses Jesse's respect to serve his purposes, manipulating and often belittling Jesse into doing his bidding. Walter loses his influence over Jesse temporarily at the start of season 2 in "Green Light", after calling his cook «substandard», but later regains control by convincing him of Gus' involvement in poisoning Brock ("End Times").

Walter also attempts to teach other characters, mostly Gale and Todd, but his influence wanes quickly and Walter ends up disposing of both as his disciples ("I See You" and "Buried").

Conversely, Saul mentors Jesse and Walter in the ways of criminal enterprise ("Better Call Saul"). His advice is often sound but delivered in such a way that serves as comic relief. Most of his recommendations involve giving up, fleeing or refusing the Call to Adventure, which completely goes against the Mentor type. Saul often fulfils the trope of Gift-Giving; he supplies the protagonists with gadgets, counsel, goons and asylum when they are desperate. Though his gifts usually do not fit their needs and end up in tragedy (ex. when Skyler asks Saul to intimidate Beneke into signing a check and Beneke ends up dead in "Crawl Space").

Opposite to this, Gus and Mike try multiple times to Mentor Jesse and Walter, often succeeding with the former and failing with the latter. Gus incites Walter to cook for him out of pride (“Más”), thus fulfilling his role as a motivator to accept the Call to Adventure, but failing to make Walter understand that he needs to dispose of Jesse in “Abiquiu”.

Gus later takes a liking to Jesse and sees «potential in him»; he teaches him how to take affirmative action and his teachings bear fruit, as Jesse saves his life in “Salud”. While Gus’ motives for teaching are self-serving, they benefit the Hero and advance the Journey.

Likewise, Mike begins dispensing advice to Walter out of pity. When his advice falls into deaf ears he builds a strong bond with Jesse in “Shotgun”. Mike mentors Jesse in a very paternalistic way, as is trope for the Mentor type. Mike also delivers the only Ritual of Passage in the show—a very old form of the monomyth according to Campbell—because of his success, Mike is very protective of Jesse (as show in “Hermanos” when he tells Walter to stop patronising Jesse).

5.6 Shadows

If the Threshold Guardian represents neuroses, then the Shadow archetype stands for psychoses that not only hamper us, but threaten to destroy us. The Shadow may simply be that shady part of ourselves that we are always wrestling with [...] The function of the Shadow in drama is to challenge the hero and give her a worthy opponent in the struggle (Vogler, 2007: 66).

Most Shadows in BB serve under the trope of Mask of the Shadow, they are characters that initially start as Allies, Mentors or even Heroes and become “the bad guy” for the season. Tuco Salamanca, , Don Eladio, Jack... are some of the most notable examples of kingpins that turn on Walter or get in his way. Their characters are shallow and their motives simplistic, they are window dressing for the plot and are invariably killed off by some clever plan or random act of violence. The true Shadows in BB are Gus and Walter.

Gus is a Humanised Shadow, a character whose motives and reasoning for his actions are easily understood by the viewer as they are explained in “Hermanos”. The character is partially redeemable, if not for his desire to jeopardise either Jesse (“Problem Dog”) or Walter (“Crawl Space”) while showing no remorse. When Gus is murdered by Walter in “Face Off”, the audience regrets his loss; his death leaves a vacuum that must be filled if the journey is to continue.

As foreshadowed in “Cornered” when Walter tells Skyler that «I am the danger» Walter’s motives for embarking on his second journey are egotistical:

WALTER (to JESSE): Jesse, you asked me if I was in the meth business or the money business. Neither. I'm in the empire business. ("Buyout", *Breaking Bad*: s5, e6)

After a certain stage of his Journey, Walter no longer desires to return to the Ordinary World and is fuelled by his greed and ambition. He is willing to go to any lengths in order to reach his goals: He will poison a child ("Crawl Space"), impulsively murder a retired partner ("Say My Name"), stage a serial killing for insurance ("Gliding Over All") and betray his only friend in an attempt to tighten his grasp onto power ("Ozymandias"). Walter fills in the void of Gus as an antagonist and forces Hank and Jesse to come forward as Heroes to oppose him. Walter is, in an ironic twist of fate, the classic villain he was so afraid of at the show's start.

5.7 Heralds

Heralds have the important psychological function of announcing the need for change [...] Heralds provide motivation, offer the hero a challenge [...] They alert the hero (and the audience) that change and adventure are coming. (Vogler, 2007: 57)

BB's premise is kickstarted by a Herald, sustained by Heralds and finished by Heralds. This is due to Vince Gilligan's fixation with red herrings and visual cues (Gilligan, 2017). While most of them are repetitive, cyclical or allegorical in nature, there are five Heralds that stand out as archetypes to the show.

The first Herald is Walter's cancer. It pulls Walter out of the Ordinary World and forces him to change or embark in a Journey. This journey is expected to last 2 years (as estimated by his doctor in "Pilot") and puts his actions in perspective. The audience can forgive and empathise with his choice to take on a life of crime for the remainder of his life. When the cancer disappears, the Adventure is supposed to be "Over" and the Hero must return to the Ordinary World. The death of a drug dealer in "Mandala" provides the excuse Walter needed to return to his Adventure.

The second Herald is the body of No-Doze ("Seven Thirty-Seven"), it marks the start of Hank's Journey. His journey is meant to end at "Green Light", but the discovery of the RV warns

him that his work must continue. Hank's second Journey is then marked by the bullet that one of the Salamanca brothers keeps in his suit, a Herald to his Inmost Cave.

Walter's descent into the archetype of the Shadow is Heralded by his finding of the Heisenberg hat. After Hank has given up again at the end of "Gliding Over All", he encounters his last Herald, the book that Gale Boetticher gave to Walter. He now understands what his true Journey is.

Similarly, Jesse is deceived by the disappearance of the ricin cigarette, a Herald of guilt that beckons his alliance with Walter. In season 5, Jesse encounters the Herald again and his true fate as a Hero is revealed. In parallel, Walter's cancer returns; their confrontation is now inevitable, as Walter will die in the predicted span of 2 years.

Heralds in the BB monomyth are always inanimate, as their appearance is the only stable thing in the Journey. The cancer, the bullet or the journal cannot be misconstrued or manipulated. Their purpose is clear, their consequences, inevitable.

6. The Journey

Initially, this project envisioned BB as a single journey monomyth with several recurring acts or "soft returns". These soft returns are justified by the need to wrap subsections of the Journey into individual seasons that are somewhat standalone and digestible by the audience. Thus, the soft return was presumed to be a restriction of the media format and not a narrative decision.

After analysing the plot and the character archetypes, it is evident that BB deliberately sets up several failed Returns to the Ordinary World in order to set up the transformation of Walter into a Shadow and inhibit the completion of his Journey. Furthermore, the audience still requires the presence of a Hero once it can no longer align itself with Walter and therefore two more Journeys are created.

This section of the project merely outlines the main sections of all three journeys, for a full detailing of a 3115-page text would dilute the essence of the monomyth as more side plots are inspected.

6.1 Calls to Adventure (CtA)

The show beckons the Heroes to adventure on five occasions. Walter's CtA is always about money, family or pride; Jesse's CtA is about opposing Walter; Hank's CtA is about duty. The only character to start the Journey more than once is Walter, as he does it every time from a different archetype.

Walter's journey starts *in media res*, we are not allowed to see into the Ordinary World until we have glimpsed into Walter's Second Threshold. Walter's Call to Adventure occurs in "Pilot" when he observes the DEA raid a meth lab and sees Jesse escape through the window. Walter does not refuse the call initially and he is tested by having to give his life savings to obtain an RV. His original Journey is about family and legacy.

Combo's death and Gus' proposal in "Mandala" are the second CtA after Walter finished his first Journey. There is no Refusal to the Call. Here he chooses Adventure over the birth of his daughter, his Journey is about money instead of family.

After his second Journey, Walter Refuses the CtA in "No Más" up to three times but is triggered by Jesse's Journey to cook again. He accepts the Call in "Más". Walter tells an unbelieving Skyler that he does it for his family. In the same episode he admits the true reason to leave the Ordinary World:

WALT (CONTINUES)

How he could possibly produce anything other than a mediocre product? At best?

(Gus responds matter-of-factly.)

GUS

I'm told his product was more or less consistent with the quality I had come to expect.

(This COMPLETELY rankles Walt. Gets under his skin.)

WALT

"MORE or LESS?" "More or less," really... wow, that is... talk about setting the bar low. (the "ah-ha" point) Except you don't do that. Set the bar low. Therefore, what proprietary kind of... selfishness about my own formula. Hmm? Some sort of... overwhelming pride, I suppose, that you think simply overwhelms me. Clouds my judgement.

GUS

But it doesn't.

WALT

Absolutely not!(feels a need to add)I simply respect the chemistry! The chemistry must be respected!

(“Más”, *Breaking Bad*: s3, e5)²

Although this excerpt is here to justify his Call to Adventure, this exchange is paramount to understanding the entire reasoning behind Walter’s actions at any point in the Journey. Walter must always have things his way and eventually the most important thing for him is to guarantee his legacy.

Hank’s journey tentatively begins in “Cancer Man”(s1 e4), there is no Call to Adventure yet, Hank’s role is still tied to Walter as Heisenberg is nothing more than a rumour. His true CtA will arrive when he discovers Gonzo’s body and he never Refuses the Call, an innate characteristic of his Hero archetype.

Finally, Jesse is Called to Adventure, becomes a Hero and opposes his old Mentor Walter and accepts Gus’ proposal as his Mentor (“Más”) in season 3. This shift in the Journey is not perceivable until much later by the audience, but at this point Walter and Jesse represent opposite parts of the monomyth.

Jesse is our peephole into the empire of Los Pollos Hermanos and the audience cannot help but feel as helpless as Jesse during the Journey. Walter represents absolute control over the Journey and exposes the frightening truth about the extents a person will go to achieve respect.

6.2 Ordeals

Ordeals mark a point of transformation and the possibility of return in BB. Each character endures many, but the most relevant to the monomyth reading are those that affect how different Heroes react to adversity.

Jane’s death (“Phoenix”) is the first common Ordeal in the show. Walter decides to take a life for personal gain, Jesse begins his path towards redemption. Hank’s first Ordeal occurs in

² Unlike the other source dialogues, this scene section has been extracted from an original script found in a licensed online repository. <https://8flix.com/assets/transcripts/breakingbad/Breaking-Bad-episode-transcript-3-05-Mas.pdf>

“Negro y Azul” when he is confronted with the horrors of the Cartel and decides he is not fit to be a Hero.

After both events, the characters realise who they want to become. This revelation is strengthened in the second common Ordeal that will be detailed later on.

6.3 Rewards and Elixirs

These are the most straightforward element of the Journey. Characters are always rewarded after an Ordeal, ironically, with the very thing they do not want. Walter is rewarded with a loving family in “Over”, when he craves recognition and power. Hank is rewarded in that very same episode with recognition, when he desperately seeks a Return. Jesse is rewarded with money constantly, which he never finds a use for as his life is empty.

Elixirs are Rewards that bring the possibility of a Return to the Ordinary World. Needless to say, there are no Elixirs in *Breaking Bad*. The best example is Walter’s cancer-free diagnosis (“Over”), which prompts a scene between him and Hank and pushes Walter to cook again out of greed. After Walter does the unspeakable in “Phoenix” to provide for his family, his atrocities separate him from Skyler and his kids. Once Walter has all the money he needs, the cancer returns (“Buyout”) and his efforts are rendered futile. No Elixir can end Walter’s Journey.

6.4 Returns

This is the most complicated section of the Journey in BB. There are five attempts from the Heroes, whether by design or chance, to Return to the Ordinary World. Walter has a chance after his visiting the Schwartzs in “Grey Matter” and after his diagnosis in “Over”. At every turn, Walter is prevented from returning or directly refuses to return. These false returns, or “soft returns” are a narrative device in BB to expose Walter’s willing, conscious decision to continue his Journey at the expense of his humanity.

After each return, Walter is a little less noble, more determined to seize control and do whatever is necessary to end up on top. Contrary to this, Jesse and Hank want to return to normalcy (Hank’s second “soft return” occurs in “One Minute” instead) but are always thrust back into action because of Walter; he convinces Jesse to return to business every time and even puts himself

in danger by suggesting to Hank that Heisenberg is still out there when he settles for Gale (“Bullet Points”). As Mike bluntly puts it, he is the reason nobody gets to be happy.

Hank cannot return from this Journey; he is a classic Hero and must sacrifice his life if Walter is to be punished.

6.5 Season Five: The second Journey

Up to this point the majority of season 5 events have been excluded from the Journey. In CtA we spoke of five departures and five returns, but only justified four. The reason is that all events in seasons 1-4 are a single Journey: a disintegration of Walter White.

Season 5 is a self-contained Journey into a promise. Walter has two years to live and has chosen to spend them alienating everyone around him in pursuit of his lost empire of Grey Matter. The characters never seem content because there is always a Mentor or a Herald to remind them of their failures, of their unfulfilled desires. The Call to Adventure for Jesse and Walter in “Hazard Play” is marked by the most ominous Herald of the show: Walter encounters his lost hat and becomes Heisenberg.

After experiencing the consequences of their Ordeal in “Dead Freight”, Walter decides that he has had enough and attempts to truly Return for the first time. His Return triggers Hank’s CtA in “Gliding Over All”, as he finds Gale’s *Leaves of Grass* (1855) copy that he dedicated to Walter.

Walter and Heisenberg’s worlds merge at this point and a return to the Ordinary World is impossible. The Unknown has become his reality and Walter’s only choice is to go to any lengths to ensure the survival of his legacy.

All three characters share a single Ordeal, the shootout in “Ozymandias” where Hank dies, Jesse is taken captive and Walter loses all of his money. Hank sacrifices his life and with it extinguishes all hope of Walter being apprehended and punished.

Lastly, Walter comes to terms with the reality of his legacy and sets up his best attempt at redemption: entrusts his money to the Schwartz (Elixir), confesses his true nature to Skyler, saves Jesse and dies “heroically” after defeating the Shadow. Jesse has an opportunity to kill Walter, but decides instead to show him mercy. He escapes his confinement in Todd’s Chevrolet el Camino, as both the Elixir and the true Hero of *Breaking Bad* that has managed to truly Return.

7. Inconsistencies and limitations of the Monomyth on *Breaking Bad*.

Breaking Bad can be understood from a monomyth perspective if huge sacrifices to the show's integrity are made. The reading exposed in this project often leaves out important plot points, character nuances and most of Gilligan's vision to offer a new aesthetic and moral experience to the audience.

Skyler's role, exemplary of many other characters in BB, is more than a Shapeshifter, her affair with Ted Beneke and the leaps and bounds of her character development are smoothed over in the oversimplification of her impact to the show if only the monomyth is concerned. As feared by the critics of the theory, the monomyth seems to deprecate and dilute "secondary" characters—who are usually women and minorities. In the monomyth only the Hero truly matters, as it so often happens, the heroes are white men.

Concerning the archetype of the Hero, the show proves its reliance in the monomyth by extending the mantle of the Hero to two other characters when Walter can no longer fulfil that purpose. However, in doing so the show exceeds the limits of Campbell's vision in so far as the purpose of the tale is concerned

Whereas multiple Heroes and the Fall are tropes common in the monomyth (*Star Wars* Obi Wan and Anakin are a prime example), the trope is always accompanied by Salvation, a modernised version of Aristotle's catharsis where the audience understands the moral dilemma that the fallen Hero experienced and expects an ultimate redemption.

Walter attempts to save Jesse on a surface level, but it is clear that his true intention is to leave his work as the only legacy of the "Blue Meth" and to seek revenge for the humiliation that Jack put him through in "Ozymandias". Even if his intentions were pure at the very end, Walter's actions through his Ordeals are inexcusable and utterly evil. There is a complete disconnect between the audience and the antihero; no conceivable path that a sane person could take to justify Walter as a result of the circumstances.

Finally, on the Journey itself, this project began by amending the idea of a single return, single journey monomyth and adapting its expectations to the format and vision of the creator. The "soft returns" and false Elixirs are plasters over deep wounds in the monomyth.

While Campbell and Vogler amply provisioned for the monomyth to adapt to such situations (Campbell, 2004: Epilogue) and admitted that the theory was not a Skeleton Key to all stories, the ultimate purpose of the monomyth is to understand the storytelling devices of any culture or text in their attempt to pass on knowledge and provide insight into the human experience.

It is my opinion that the effort required to adapt the monomyth to justify itself to *Breaking Bad*, or to any text that deliberately intends to escape its grasp, is a monumental and counterproductive endeavour.

8. The Departure from the Monomyth, the Return of the Monomyth.

Breaking Bad is a direct product of the same monomyth that dictated much of the second Golden Age of television. This project made a very compelling argument for the use of the monomyth in literary criticism as a tool to dissect and understand the collective unconscious behind intermediality in contemporary literature. More specifically, the Hero and Antihero archetypes depicted in BB are well within the reach of a theory devised for a bygone era.

Despite its relative faithfulness to the monomyth, I cannot confidently say that the monomyth managed to understand *Breaking Bad*. This project had to make many concessions and omissions to maintain a levelled argument. A properly detailed deconstruction of all its plot would probably surpass the extension of the text itself. At which point a theory meant to encompass knowledge becomes a body of work in itself.

Vince Gilligan made a point of creating a show that entertained the audiences by fulfilling most of the tropes that characterised the rise of the third Golden Age of television, while departing at the same time from those familiar concepts and venturing into uncharted territory.

Breaking Bad presents itself as a show about «a protagonist turning into an antagonist» (Gilligan, 2017) but its core values remain entirely within the monomyth: the Shadow must die, the Hero will risk it all and there must be one character left that is capable of Returning Home. He wanted the audience to «be confused that they are cheering for the bad guy» (Gilligan, 2017).

It would be foolish to pretend that BB is the first in subverting the stereotypes of storytelling in the 21st century. Texts like Bret Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) have also played on the archetypes. But it is perhaps one of the loudest examples of attempting to transform the existing tropes.

Unlike *American Psycho*, BB places a solid structure around the evil, irredeemable protagonist, a structure of Heroes that can be understood by the audience but not liked by the audience, at least not in the same manner that Walter is. The text tugs at the strings of human morality and is essentially a philosophical debate about heroism in a capitalist society.

Walter starts his journey wanting to be a martyr, a hero in the eyes of his family upon his passing. He is constantly surrounded by humbling examples of what others consider heroic: Gretchen and Elliot are heroes for their goodwill in paying for his cancer treatment, Hank is a hero for his courage in the face of danger, Gus is a hero for his charitable actions. Most embarrassingly, Walter Jr. thinks of his father as a hero when he starts an internet fundraising campaign. He thinks of him as a hero because he is pathetically and unequivocally helpless.

In the end, Walter ends his journey wanting to be remembered for the empire he built, the empire that Grey Industries was meant to be, the empire that his family refused and his enemies took away from him. *Breaking Bad* remains faithful to the trope that evil never triumphs. Even though, we want him to triumph, we want Walter to be rich and successful and powerful. *Breaking Bad* tugs at the tension between moral acuity and its irreconcilable relationship with the American Dream.

9. Conclusions

I started this project with the intention of understanding the inner workings of the monomyth and *Breaking Bad* altogether. As the arguments unravelled, I gained an understanding of the fundamental limitations of the monomyth; BB tells more than one story, more than one myth and uses more than one archetype. It can be explained through the monomyth, but I see no reason why it should.

On principle, a theory is supposed to ease the process of interpretation. Instead this project felt cornered; unable to escape labels, archetypes, rules and strict definitions. Subjectivity was not a concern, shoehorning arguments to fit the monomyth was, however, a looming pitfall that I have tried to avoid to the best of my ability.

Perhaps the most surprising outcome of this project, on a personal level, is how humbling the entire experience has been. Performing due diligence on Literary Criticism, that is, to set a theory in the landscape of its field, while keeping a level-headed perspective on its potential and its limitations. It is challenging and self-limiting to abstain from cherry-picking sources and quotes to defend or attack an argument.

At times one can make the mistake of scouring the primary source for quotes that justify their position, instead of trying to explain the text through the quotes themselves. It is crucial to remind ourselves of our biases and the biases of others when we write and read research. To put it bluntly: The monomyth is not an unbiased theory.

Proponents of the monomyth defend how malleable and interchangeable these labels are, that not all are needed, and many are misinterpreted wilfully. Yet in the more than 70 years of its existence, the original 1949 version of Campbell's work and a 2014 version by Vogler read practically the same. Vogler made his version for TV and film, however, any respectable scholar in intermediality would have to heavily amend each label to avoid characters like Skyler from falling through the cracks.

In short, this project has provided a future venue for research on the archetype of the modern antihero through the lens of the monomyth. The rise of this new archetype is now commonplace and may be the groundwork for a new version of the monomyth. Ultimately, I do not believe Campbell's current version of the monomyth to be a reliable tool to understand contemporary writing from a scholarly point of view. The monomyth must change or fade to black.

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