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Victims, Heroes, and Villains: Imaginary Beings in Contemporary Television Serials

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Abstract: This chapter traces melodrama's historical triumvirate of characters – victims, heroes, and villains – to examine how they are applied in contemporary television serial dramas. Looking in particular at the examples of *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul,* the author argues that the characterological trio now often exists within singular protagonists who follow a narrative trajectory from victim through hero to arrive, ultimately, at villainy. Collapsing the characterological triad into single protagonists marks a late modern version of melodrama in which the possibilities for heroism are circumscribed, leaving characters able to opt only for victimization or villainy.

Introduction

In the narrative modality known as melodrama, one of the most familiar, enduring conceptualizations of characters exists in the triumvirate of victims, heroes, and villains, historically personified as distinct entities. This characterological structure is pivotal for melodrama's central preoccupation surrounding notions of justice and injustice. Further, melodrama has been considered a quintessentially modern narrative mode, developing around 1800 to eventually spread across media (theatre, literature, film, television). While the melodramatic mode survives and thrives in the present day, this chapter explores how the characterological trio has transformed, in certain televisual cases, in order to remain relevant for twenty-first century audiences. In recent dramatic serials, a

contemporary exemplar of melodrama, the previously well-defined characterological triad has purposefully become blurred, as in the instances of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *The Wire* (2002-2008), and *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014-present). The characterological trio now also exists *within* single characters, as is evident in the crime dramas, *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) and its companion series, *Better Call Saul* (2015-present), whose narrative trajectories are driven by the movement of their protagonists from one end of the victim-hero-villain spectrum to the other, resulting in multiply identified lead characters (Walter/Heisenberg; Jimmy/Saul Goodman).

I argue that the triumvirate continues to exist in most popular genres, as part of the ongoing power of the *melodramatic imagination* towards making sense of our sociocultural worlds. However, instances where the three personas of victim-hero-villain exist in singular protagonists reflect a late modern loss of faith in the possibility of heroism, in particular. Although defying one's status as victim equates with heroism, heroic virtue can no longer convincingly vanquish perpetrators, but must be met by the same tactics used by villains to prevail. I explore how such shifts in fictional imaginary beings signal a twenty-first century consciousness that, in the melodramatic mode, is conveyed through emotional structures, in particular, via the multi-layered, multi-emotion complex known as pathos.

When Good Guys Break Bad

A number of scholars have noted that no sufficiently systematic, inclusive model exists by which to take account of narrative characterization.[1] Henriette Heidbrink attributes this lack to "the diversity and complexity" of fictional characters as "plurivalent

phenomena."[2] As a result, responses to questions regarding what factors most essentially constitute characters have been similarly diversified, including a dizzying array of suppositions in which characters are formulated as (or combinations among): "structures, signs, trait-clusters, agents, rhetoric effects, plot functions, humanlike persons, mental representations, imaginative beings, inhabitants of a fictional/possible world."[3] I focus on characters as "imaginative beings," as that notion might be conceived through the lens of melodrama, a specific but extensive and significant narrative modality.

Heidbrink suggests that a principal criterion in determining the value of any approach to characterization rests in its practical usefulness in making sense of mediated aesthetic figures.[4] Murray Smith takes the notion of theoretical utility a step further, arguing that analytical approaches ought to also account for the widespread, popular meanings and values characterization holds for audiences.[5] On this basis, one of the most culturally resonant formulations centers around the triumvirate of hero-villain-victim, bequeathed from melodrama. Reductive yet salient, due to its widespread familiarity and ongoing application, characters in film and television remain routinely viewed and reviewed through the framework of heroic "good guys," villainous "bad guys," or vulnerable victims.

Following Peter Brooks,[6] Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams,[7] and others, I use *melodrama* to refer to a broad narrative mode that encompasses most of the popular genres with which American audiences are familiar, including the crime, police, and detective formats. Established around 1800, first in theatre, then literature, before migrating to film and television at their inventions, melodrama is regarded as a dominant aesthetic mode that, additionally, reflects a modern consciousness or imagination. For

instance, in his 1995 preface to *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Brooks describes melodrama as a coherent imaginative mode that exists as "an inescapable dimension of modern consciousness."[8] Forged against a backdrop of industrialization, urbanization, escalating economic inequities and hardships due to capitalism's burgeoning forms of mass production and mass consumption, alongside the rise of mass media, melodrama was, and remains, inextricably linked with modernity.

Melodrama's modern consciousness can be identified in its preoccupation, following the mode's solidification in the wake of the French Revolution, with "Enlightenment values of freedom, equality, and justice."[9] Regardless of greater or lesser success in specific instances, melodrama's broad intent impels it to strive towards "a better justice."[10] To the extent that the playing out of various renditions of justice and injustice serves as a central melodramatic concern, it becomes evident that the crime, police, and detective genres hold particular relevance for the melodramatic project. Stated conversely, detective, police, and crime narratives, deriving from their "parent, melodrama,"[11] are permeated with varying arrangements of justice and injustice.[12]

Over the course of the nineteenth century, melodrama served as a "central cultural paradigm" across a number of European and other societies, based on a foundation of "the conflict of manichean opposites."[13] Manichean opposites reference an imaginative worldview divided into clearly demarcated, polarized forces of good versus evil. Historically, melodrama's imaginative values were enacted by today's still familiar triumvirate of characters: victim, hero, villain. Connected to the worldview of binary opposites, each member of the triumvirate was traditionally depicted as a distinct entity with its own proper traits and behaviors while, at the same time, remaining entirely

dependent on the other roles in order to stake out its respective terrain. In the historical melodramatic system:

> innocence and villainy construct each other: while the villain is necessary to the production and revelation of innocence, innocence defines the boundaries of the forbidden which the villain breaks.[14]

Thus, virtue became delineated by the forces of evil that surrounded and threatened it, just as villainy was identified by the innocence that stood steadfast in its face, regardless of ensuing pain or punishment.

A further line of demarcation among the characterological triad concerned the methods open to its respective members. "By definition," as Gledhill recounts, in nineteenth century melodrama, the innocent hero "cannot use the powers available to the villain; following the dictates of their nature, they must become victims."[15] While all manner of malfeasance was unleashed by agents of villainy, heroic forces could not respond in kind without undermining their very standing as heroic. Instead, they had no recourse but to take up the limited actions – or inactions – accessible to the virtuous. As a result, heroes could easily evolve into innocent victims, while innocent victims suffered in stoic passivity unless and until forces intervened to alter the trajectory of their existences, providing opportunities to defeat villainy by virtuous means.[16] The purpose of this analysis is to track the changes within contemporary melodramatic protagonists from victim to hero to villain, and to consider in what ways these transformations are reflective of a late modern imaginative worldview. Returning to Heidbrink's panoply of character conceptualizations, I deploy fictional characters to refer to "imaginative beings" as the figures appearing in mediated narrative contexts that are able to call up cultural concepts through various aesthetic strategies. They are imaginative beings, not in the simple sense

of the products of a creator's imagination, but in the full implications of melodrama's appeal to a modern worldview, enacting particular sensibilities.

Melodrama continues to survive and, indeed, flourishes because of its capacity to adapt to changing eras and conditions. The mode has realigned, in keeping with the altered social circumstances from nineteenth century to twenty-first century modernity, responding with a commensurately different imaginative worldview. Late modernity's events occur on an even more vast scale, including globalization, the widespread effects of neoliberalism, the advent of authoritarian forces in varying locations around the world, and extensive mass migration accompanying other intensifying "masses" (production, consumption, mediated communication).[17] Yet these changes do not entail that the melodramatic imagination must disappear. On the contrary, the terms of the mode's aesthetic and cultural paradigm are amended for late modern audiences, while *remaining recognizably* melodramatic. Twenty-first century melodrama continues to seek a better justice, in ways that resonate for its current audiences, as we can see in the examples of the crime drama *Breaking Bad* and its spin-off, *Better Call Saul.*

Both residents of Albuquerque, New Mexico, Walter White and Saul Goodman's alter (original) ego, Jimmy McGill, the protagonists of their respective series, set out on their narrative trajectories from the position of victim. Walter White (Bryan Cranston) is victimized by the circumstances of his health, diagnosed with lung cancer at age 50 although he has never smoked. Additionally, he suffers through his economic plight as an underpaid high school teacher forced to work a second job at a car wash and by his low social status, going without recognition although a gifted chemist. Finally, his personality renders him a victim because he is too meek and mild-mannered to stand up to anyone. In

the series' first episode ("Pilot"), we watch as Walter is humiliated by his boss at the car wash, and by a student whose vehicle he is forced to wipe down. In later episodes of Season 1, we feel sympathy as Walter undergoes radiation and chemotherapy, is affected by harsh side effects, and must pay $90,000 out of pocket for the treatment.[18] He is further humiliated when his former, highly successful business partner offers him a job out of pity, and then treats him as a "charity" case, in Walter's description, by offering to pay for his medical treatment outright.

Better Call Saul functions as a prequel, primarily taking place in the six years prior to the events of *Breaking Bad.* Its main character, Jimmy McGill (Bob Odenkirk), also sets out as a victim: a nice guy with a past as a small-time con artist and a questionable law degree (online from the University of American Samoa) who initially seems too weak to thrive in a cutthroat legal world. When we first encounter Jimmy, he works as a public defender, earning only $700 per case, while attempting, with little success, to establish his own private practice from a cramped room where he works and lives, in the back of a nail salon. In terms of personal strengths, while Walter is a gifted chemist, Jimmy possesses the gift of gab. His victimization occurs most notably at the hands of his brother, Chuck (Michael McKean), a brilliant attorney who suffers from a debilitating psychological illness. Jimmy takes care of Chuck physically, emotionally, and financially, the latter accounting for Jimmy's economic woes. Despite the latter's dutiful and devoted efforts, Chuck works to undermine his younger brother's accomplishments as a lawyer, succeeding through his machinations in having Jimmy's legal license suspended.

That the protagonists of both shows begin as victims is crucial in enabling them to inhabit the role of hero, in which each of them takes up illicit activities in order to escape victimization. In Walter's case he becomes a manufacturer of crystal methamphetamine. For his part, Saul/Jimmy establishes a practice as legal representative to lawbreakers, specializing in those involved in drug trafficking. Gledhill argues that the melodramatic hero can always turn into victim when the tactics available to the villain exist beyond the realm of possible behaviors for a heroic character. However, the reverse sequencing also exists, as we see with Walter and Jimmy, in which victims, in addressing their own victimization, take up the heroic mantle.[19] Because hero-villain characters originate as victims, their villainy must be learned, as in the cases of *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul.* Further, their status as victims renders their ultimate villainy palatable, at least for a time, in addition to clearing a space for the intermediary emergence (between victim and villainy) of their heroism. In the next section, I consider how the heroic phase in contemporary TV serials can be quite fleeting. That is, heroism may well operate as only a transitional phase in the trajectory from victim to villain.

The Delights of Villainy

Melodrama's villains have long provided audiences with pleasure. Helen Day-Mayer and David Mayer describe the villainous figures of nineteenth century theatrical productions as "the engine of melodrama."[20] Jeffrey Mason builds a similar argument, emphasizing the necessity of depicted evil to a melodramatic imaginative worldview. In the latter's analysis, classic melodrama configures a stable, morally ordered, virtuous world, depicted as the norm in the dual sense of idealized vision and the place of return at

drama's end. In the most familiar, tradition-worn structure, melodrama serves as "the arena wherein hero and heroine contend against villain, and the forces of virtue ultimately defeat the forces of evil."[21]

In order to achieve this imaginative organization, dramatic crisis occurs when the stable world is threatened, exposing the vulnerability and fragility of the portrayed idealized world. Thus "virtue" represents "the world as it should be, stable, safe, and at rest" while "evil" functions to shatter "complacency and calls any order into question."[22] The complacency of the virtuous world, at times rendering it a banal locale, explains why the villain so often becomes the most compelling character. His, or more rarely her, capacity to upend norms instigates events and, thereby, villainy functions as the engine that drives melodramatic dramaturgy. It is evil that intrudes, invades, and constantly threatens, rendering the drama possible in the first place.

However, in certain strands of twenty-first-century televisual melodrama, villainy endures but heroism exists in a much-diminished capacity as a viable means towards evil's vanquishment, if we understand evil as any perceived form of injustice. Such forces of evil are alive and well in late modern serial melodrama, with villains continuing to threaten and, in doing so, still delighting audiences. Heroism constitutes the gap in current imagination in the example of these serial television dramas. Evil can no longer be naively confronted by heroic innocence but must be matched, step-by-step, with villainy in order to succeed.

If the struggle in traditional melodrama between virtue and evil is "irreconcilable,"[23] because one social force must succeed at the cost of the other, nowadays they are irreconcilable in a different sense. Villainy endures but naïve heroism

is no longer a sufficiently viable means towards its demise. Gledhill's "by definition" concerning heroic behavior in which melodrama demands that the innocent hero "cannot use the power available to the villain" no longer operates as axiomatic and, therefore, neither does the innocent hero as historically understood, although villain and victim remain intact. Thus, certain characters continue to exist as protagonists but no longer as heroes in the ways they have been historically conceived, as is evident in the case of Walter White.

When Walter defies his status as victim by taking control of the direction and conditions of his own life, he turns heroic, rooted on by audiences despite the fact that he seizes power over his existence by applying his chemistry skills to cooking meth. In fact, how this occurs is carefully managed narratively, in order to be able to see him as heroic, to root for his cause, at least for a while. Walter's initial efforts in the drug trade culminate in a series of disasters, encompassing the first three episodes of Season 1. Fiascoes include poisoning two drug dealers (Emilio and Crazy 8) in order to save himself and his partner-in-crime, Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul), from execution, and then having to purposefully murder Crazy 8 (Max Arciniega) who survives the poisoning, so that Walter quickly racks up his second killing. Additionally, Walter and Jesse find themselves cleaning up the acid-drenched, decomposing blood and guts of Emilio's (John Koyama) remains, a viscerally disgusting sequence composed through skillful cinematography (for example, shooting upwards through glass flooring). The significance, here, is that Walter's initial excursions in the drug business are neither empowering nor pleasurable but, instead, horrific. Indeed, he spends most of his time nerve-wracked, for instance, passing two excruciating days and two full episodes ("Cat's

in the Bag…;" "…And the Bag's in the River") before working up the courage to choke Crazy 8 to death.

At the outset, Walter does not take to villainy easily. The displeasures of his new enterprise help configure Walter as initially heroic rather than villainous because he pursues his chosen course *despite* the almost insurmountable difficulties involved, and because he does so *for* a worthy cause: paying for his cancer treatment. In working to establish his heroic position, Walter's moments of exhilarating empowerment for most of Season 1 occur in the shape of events not connected to him making or selling meth, for example, when he stands up to bullies who are making fun of his disabled teenage son, quits his demeaning car wash job in a pique of righteous fury, or blows up the expensive sports car of an affluent, obnoxious businessman because he steals Walter's parking space, talks too loudly on his Blue Tooth device in public places, and makes ugly, sexist comments.

In contrast, Walter's most prominent Season 1 victory within the context of the drug business takes place in Episode 6 ("Crazy Handful of Nothin'"). Walter's first confrontation with Tuco (Raymond Cruz) marks the onset of the former's villainy as much as it displays an empowering heroism we can cheer on. After Tuco has severely beaten Jesse and kept their $35,000 worth of meth without payment, Walter brazenly shows up at Tuco's headquarters alone, demanding the money. Walter, in his first appearance as his alter-ego Heisenberg, creates a large explosion using fulminated mercury cleverly disguised as crystal meth, then threatens to blow up all of them, himself included, if Tuco does not comply with his demands. Of course, Tuco complies and Heisenberg wins. And of course, the audience cheers on this dazzling feat. The difference

in this encounter does not lie in the degree of violence – no one dies – but in the *pleasure* Walter derives from it.

The confrontation with Tuco displays the double-edged dynamic of heroism/villainy, not because Walter pursues a particularly egregious course, as so many of Walter-as-Heisenberg's future actions will prove to be, but due to the fact that what occurs is no longer an unpleasant or even horrific means to an end for Walter: it transpires as an end in itself. His deep pleasure in the victory is palpable when Walter gets back into his car, after the encounter, emitting satisfied groans and a smug half-smile as he drives off and the episode ends. Lest we miss the transformation that occurs in this sequence, the encounter with Tuco is the first time Walter appears bald in public and the first occasion that he invokes the name, Heisenberg.[24] The significance of this turning point is that, for some modern-day protagonists, heroism without villainy no longer remains possible. In order to survive, many late modern heroes *must* use the same power accessed by villains, thereby undercutting the very existence of heroism. As Walter/Heisenberg grows increasingly evil, each viewer must decide one's personal breaking point. Does the audience member opt to go along with Walter for the entire narrative ride? If not, at what juncture have Walter's actions become unacceptable, exceeding all permissible moral bounds so that audiences feel compelled to break away, to no longer regard him as someone to cheer on? The trajectory of the series is a narrative game of sorts, testing viewers through their own moral discomfort, in order to find out how long they can sustain the hero-villain dynamic, before conceding that perpetrator or victimhood is all.

At the opening of the same episode in which Heisenberg confronts Tuco, Walter and Jesse begin cooking again, following a hiatus after having killed Emilio and Crazy 8. As they return to their meth business, Walter turns to Jesse, insisting, "No matter what happens, no more bloodshed, no violence." Walter's naïve words remind us that late modern protagonists who set out as victims must learn their villainy. However, Walter's words serve a further narrative purpose; if innocent heroism is no longer admissible, a late modern imagination continues to frame the world in its shadow. Such contemporary melodramas still cast their moral universe in terms of the old characterological trio of victim, hero, villain. Even when positioned as no longer tenable, the equation as social consciousness endures, even if it fails to operate as it used to. American television series like *Breaking Bad* suggest an era in which we still wish to believe in the possibility of heroism, the recognition of villainy, and the unfairness of suffering victims. Yet we no longer feel able, with the same ease or certainty, to identify which is which. Contrasting an earlier melodramatic outlook, a number of twenty-first century TV serials frame a sociocultural horizon in which the suffering and heroic do not inherit the earth. Power resides with the hardhearted, those willing to go to any extreme and, so, only those prepared to take up villainy can function "heroically," while the rest remain victimized.

The Pathos of Injustice

According to Jens Eder, heroes and villains are those fictional beings who operate within "a system of values."[25] Heroes and villains are the creatures belonging to the world of melodrama; its system of values references a worldview embedded in moral concerns. Chief among these concerns rests the expressed wish for justice, fairness, and equity.

Additionally, in order to enact its values, melodrama's worlds are configured through emotionality and emotional relations.

Although melodrama trades in a wealth of sentiments, the emotional organization most closely associated with the mode is found in the operations of pathos. Gledhill explains that pathos is not an emotion – equivalent to pity, sympathy, or compassion – because pathos entails the audience knowing (and *feeling*) more than the character does.[26] Rather, pathos functions as an emotional structuration that involves three layers or tiers. First, audiences must recognize the specific feelings experienced by a suffering victim, perhaps terror, grief, or a deep sense of isolation. Second, viewers respond to the character's suffering, with pity, sympathy, compassion, or other emotions. Third, and pivotally because we understand more about the character's circumstances than he or she does, we may feel anger, sorrow, guilt, or frustration for the *causes* of the wronged person's pain. In other words, pathos involves recognizing, responding to, *and* critiquing the social or other sources of characterological suffering, and doing so through our own emotional reactions.[27]

Initially, Walter's and Jimmy's circumstances evoke pathos. But as they take up increasingly pernicious positions, pathos shifts to the characters whom they, in turn, render victims. The protagonists' emotional position in both series changes along with their status from victim to villain, whereby they become the source, rather than the recipients, of the pathos we critique. The trajectory of *Better Call Saul* follows the inverse narrative line to *Breaking Bad* in that we know where Jimmy ends up: as "*criminal* lawyer," Saul Goodman (in Jesse Pinkman's apt stress point). In contrast to *Breaking Bad's* narrative drive that keeps viewers wondering the ultimate extent of

Walter's corruption, *Better Call Saul* is impelled by curiosity as to the circumstances that lead Jimmy to his given, eventual destination as Saul. Whereas Walter breaks bad in the first episode of the series, and becomes Heisenberg in Season 1, it takes a full four seasons for Jimmy to officially take on the persona of Saul Goodman. Events until the finale of Season 4 ("Winner") function as a kind of lengthy backstory that viewers wait out, whether patiently or not.

Additionally, Saul's dark side never grows as egregious as Walter's, in that the former doesn't, himself, commit violent acts. Instead, Jimmy/Saul perpetrates cons and serves as legal representative for people whom he is fully aware are violent criminals. Saul's immoral acts concern what he knows and facilitates more than what he does. Thus, Saul's villainous acts are more nuanced than is the case with Walter.[28] However, the two series share in common a narrative arc that follows their main characters' movements from victim to hero to villainy. The heroic stage concerns fighting back: taking on the world rather than reconciling oneself to being one of life's victims. Additionally, in both cases the turning point to narrative villainy takes place through an emotional event, signaled by the emergence of their new personas, Heisenberg and Saul Goodman. In Walter's case, as we saw, Heisenberg appears as the outcome of Walter's felt pleasure in his successful confrontation with Tuco. In Jimmy's instance, Saul emerges as chosen identity at the emotional expense of Jimmy's colleague and romantic partner, Kim Wexler (Rhea Seehorn). Specifically, Jimmy's choice to become Saul shifts the pathos inherent in the situation *from* Jimmy *to* Kim.

On the first occasion Jimmy applies to get his suspended law license reinstated (Season 4, Episode 9, "Wiederschen"), not long following Chuck's suicide, Jimmy fails

to mention his older brother who is much admired by the members of the panel. Instead, when asked the leading question, who has been a significant influence on Jimmy in terms of the law, he responds flippantly with, “The University of American Samoa. Go Land Crabs,” rather than crediting Chuck, the answer the panel seeks. Jimmy’s reinstatement petition is turned down on the grounds the panel found him to be “insincere.”

Much of *Better Call Saul’s* reinstatement subplot revolves around the emotional issue of sincerity and insincerity. When Jimmy explains to Kim what transpired, he is adamant he was being entirely sincere throughout the hearing; that he failed to mention Chuck because the latter had nothing to do with the matter at hand. As so often when emotions are concerned, ambiguity prevails in how to interpret Jimmy’s explanation. Perhaps Jimmy was – or genuinely believes himself to have been – sincere at the hearing, as he insists. Equally plausibly, however, Jimmy’s answers were conditioned by his anger at Chuck: for killing himself, for Chuck’s machinations that caused Jimmy’s law license suspension in the first place. If the latter, then Jimmy denies his actual feelings, apparent to the panel and Kim, if not to himself.

The question of sincerity and insincerity recurs when Jimmy appeals the panel’s decision, in the finale of Season 4 (“Winner”). On this occasion, using his verbal gifts Jimmy delivers a passionate statement to the appeals board concerning his admiration for and indebtedness to Chuck. His words mesmerize the members of the appeals board and bring Kim to tears. Indeed, Kim’s response is pivotal to the outcome of the reinstatement sequence. As Jimmy speaks, seven cutaways occur to the four members of the appeals panel as they listen, but these are exceeded by the eleven cutaways to Kim, all in medium close-up, including her tearing up in response to Jimmy’s apparently moving words.

Immediately following, the sequence cuts to an elated Jimmy and Kim in the hallway outside the appeals venue. Both are jubilant at Jimmy's victory but, as it transpires, for different reasons. Kim expresses her pride: "I knew you could do it. I knew you had it in you." In contrast, Jimmy boasts, "Did you see those suckers? That one asshole was crying, he had actual tears," shocking Kim into silence because she, too, had believed in the sincerity of his performance. Jimmy's revelation of his feelings renders Kim, with her tears, just another one of the asshole suckers.

The narrative impact of the reinstatement sequence does not exist because Jimmy has conned another group of marks, this time legal professionals; the problem is that he cons Kim, the person whom he is closest to and who, as she makes clear and unlike Chuck, most believes in Jimmy. At this moment, pathos shifts from Jimmy to Kim, because he fails to recognize the betrayal that his behavior creates. However, the audience identifies the betrayal involved and, thus, her shock and hurt become the focal point of sympathy, even if we believe Jimmy deserves to regain his law license. To underline the point, at this moment in time Jimmy announces that he refuses to practice law under the name McGill and, so, will officially become Saul Goodman. As he departs with a county clerk to sign the forms that will legally change his name, the episode and season ends on a wide shot of Kim left alone, looking stunned and lost.

In traditional melodrama, a fictional being cannot be an insincere hero; that would be using the tools and techniques available to villains (dishonesty, manipulation, deceit). Kim wants to believe in Jimmy as hero ("I knew you had it in you"), which explains why Jimmy having conned her feels like such a betrayal. And Jimmy spends most of the first four seasons of *Better Call Saul* aspiring to accept the possibility of heroism, thinking he

can play it straight and succeed as a lawyer, until Chuck's death in addition to the loss of his right to practice law convince him otherwise. Thus, he opts for feigning the sincerity the appeals board expects, following his first, dismal failure at regaining his license.

We witnessed a similar effort at naïve heroism with Walter, in his attempted avowal to stay in the drug trade, earning the money he needs for his medical treatment and to provide for his family, *without* perpetrating violence. Walter's commitment doesn't even last the televisual hour before he finds himself confronting Tuco by means of a spectacularly violent explosion and, in the process, learning he likes the power that violence brings. Walter's conviction that he can engage in a criminal enterprise without it changing or tarnishing him is foolishly naïve to the point of delusional. Both Jimmy and Walter prove self-deceptive in believing that circumstances could be otherwise. The error of their ways is to have faith they will be given a chance, that the world in which they exist will somehow turn into a fair or kind place. In the imaginative world of twenty-first century modernity, as seen on television, the hero cannot maintain his or her innocence. If the protagonist refuses the position of victim, he (in our examples) takes on the role of victimizer.

We recognize the doubled identity of both series' protagonists: the victims, Walter and Jimmy; and the ultimate villains, Heisenberg and Saul Goodman. In fact, each character has a third persona, that of *failed* hero. In the fifth and last season of *Breaking Bad*, a defeated Walter/Heisenberg returns to Albuquerque as Mr. Lambert from New Hampshire. His purpose is to secretly leave behind money for his family and, in that process, he performs the partially redemptive, last-minute act of rescuing his former partner, Jesse. *Better Call Saul's* post-Saul Goodman persona is broken-down Gene,

manager of a Cinnabon franchise in Omaha, Nebraska. As Gene, Jimmy/Saul leads a quietly respectable, working-class existence, hiding out in his new life of obscurity while constantly fearful of discovery. All three identities – victim, villain, and failed hero – are necessary to the contemporary elaboration of melodrama's core concern, "the pathos of injustice."[29]

Pathos, then, conveys the story through emotion. And while it usually involves the sympathetic sentiments, like pity, empathy or compassion, it operates as an organizational mechanism, incorporating a potentially enormous range of feelings, among which the villains' are essential. Day-Mayer and Mayer speak of melodrama's long line of victims, destined to encounter villainy in the shape of "malice, avarice, lust, envy, and cruelty."[30] What once may have been considered sins, we now recognize as emotions. For Mason, fear of villainy is the "generative impulse" of melodrama, the engine that keeps dramatic events hurtling forward.[31] In Episode 1 of Season 5 ("Live Free or Die"), Walter has killed his principal nemesis, clearing his way to becoming drug kingpin, and making it safe for his wife, Skyler (Anna Gunn), and their kids to return to their home. Shortly after her return, Walter hugs Skyler and she freezes, too petrified to object or move, too terrified by what he is capable of doing. Walter, knowing this, enjoys the power he now exerts over his wife, the power to frighten her into submission. That is the villainy upon which pathos depends. Following Patrick Colm Hogan's argument, Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider suggest that contemporary storytelling may be generated upon the basis of "a restricted set of human emotions."[32] On the contrary, it is the complexity and heterogeneity of emotionality that helps account for melodrama's ongoing vigor and proliferation.

Conclusion

What then do these contemporary examples of melodramatic TV serials depict about the twenty-first century imagination? What is it we now do with imaginary beings? According to Matthew Buckley, one of the numerous ways melodrama operationalized its potent version of modern consciousness was that it "conditioned the modern world's active structures of feeling."[33] Twenty-first century melodrama continues to activate our contemporary structures of feeling, even as those structures differ from nineteenth and early twentieth century renditions.

Certainly we remain sensitive to the vulnerability, fragility, and precarity of society's victims. And if we understand evil as any form of injustice, we continue to experience narrative worlds rich with a variety of villainous perpetrators. The principal difference rests with the hero persona. In the examples discussed, victims and victimizers no longer depend upon heroes, the least feasible role in the traditional triad for late modern consciousness. Victims and villains still constitute prevalent characters but there exist fewer plausible heroic constructions. In these narrative worlds, one can be either naïve (formerly innocent) and so victimized, or the perpetrator of victimization.

Currently we imagine villainy must be defeated by near-equal pernicious means. Some of our most popular televisual narrative worlds are populated by victims and perpetrators, with barely a sustainable hero among them. No intermediary or intervening heroic position exists upon which to stand, at least not for any significant duration. Arguably, then, the late modern imaginary becomes an even more polarized worldview. Simultaneously, however, we cling to the terms of the traditional equation of a moral

triad because we cannot see our way clear to a viable alternative. The triumvirate of characters, and the system of values it represents, holds firm even if the original terms of a stable, orderly place to return to at drama's end can no longer be accomplished. Without an alternate, equally compelling vision, we continue to long for a system of values dependent upon heroes who will fight on behalf of victims by virtuous means, in order to defeat perpetrators of injustice, even as we recognize the limitations of that worldview. The result is a complicated relationship with today's protagonists, in which we often prefer our victims as rather villainous, and our villains as failed heroes.

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[1] Henriette Heidbrink, "Fictional Characters in Literary and Media Studies: A Survey of the Research," in *Characters in Fictional Worlds: Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and Other Media*, eds. Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 67; Roberta Pearson, "Anatomising Gilbert Grissom: The Structure and Function of the Televisual Character," in *Reading CSI: Crime TV under the Microscope,* ed. Michael Allen (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 39-56; Jens Eder, "Understanding Characters," *Projections* 4, no. 1 (2010), 37; Amanda Lotz, "*House:* Narrative Complexity," in *How to Watch Television*, eds. Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell (New York: New York University Press), 23; Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White, *The Film Experience: An Introduction* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004), 224.

[2] Heidbrink, "Fictional Characters in Literary and Media Studies," 67, 104.

[3] Ibid., 96.

[4] Ibid., 91.

[5] Murray Smith, "Engaging Characters: Further Reflections," in *Characters in Fictional Worlds: Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and Other Media*, eds. Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 233.

[6] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess,* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995 [1976]).

[7] Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, eds., *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

[8] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination,* vii.

[9] Linda Williams, "'Tales of Sound and Fury…' or, The Elephant of Melodrama," in *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures,* eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 214.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Simon Shepherd, "Pauses of Mutual Agitation," in *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen,* eds. Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, and Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1994), 25.

[12] I have referred to the genre-set of police, detective, crime, gangster, legal, and similar mediated narratives as the 'justice genres' for this reason. E. Deidre Pribram, *Emotions, Genre, Justice in Film and Television: Detecting Feeling* (New York: Routledge, 2013 [2011]).

[13] Christine Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film,* ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 2002 [1987]), 19-20.

[14] Ibid., 21.

[15] Ibid., 30.

[16] Although this describes strong tendencies in nineteenth century melodramatic characterization, it is not inclusive of all instances. Day-Mayer and Mayer point out that, from the 1860s, certain lead actors took on the doubled identity of both hero and villain, for example, in stagings *of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.* Day-Mayer and Mayer, "Performing/Acting Melodrama," 103-104.

[17] For an account of late modernity, see Roger Patulny and Rebecca Olson, "Emotions in Late Modernity," in *Emotions in Late Modernity*, eds. Roger Patulny, Alberto Bellocchi, Sukhmani Khorana, Rebecca Olson, Jordan McKenzie, and Michelle Peterie (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 8-24.

[18] The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare") did not pass until 2010, so the White's depicted problems with health insurance were quite plausible in 2008.

[19] It is quite common in action films or police series for heroes to engage in the struggle for justice on behalf of *others* as victims, such as the targets of murder or rape. Here, I'm particularly concerned with protagonists who take action against their own victimization. Although beyond the bounds of this chapter, to confront their own rather than others' victimization could suggest, first, a certain self-centered, self-absorbed kind of protagonist and, second, perhaps plays into a disturbing politics of grievance on the part of white men, as one of the series' structures of feeling.

[20] Helen Day-Mayer and David Mayer, "Performing/Acting Melodrama," in *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures,* eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 103.

[21] Jeffrey Mason, *Melodrama and the Myth of America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 17.

[22] Ibid., 18.

[23] Ibid., 17.

[24] Walter names himself after Nobel Prize winning physicist, Werner Heisenberg, best known for his theory of quantum mechanics.

[25] Eder, "Understanding Characters," 31.

[26] Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field," 30.

[27] Christine Gledhill, "Signs of Melodrama," in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991), 226.

[28] I write this after the end of Season 4 so, of course, do not know if this pattern will hold true for the entire run of the series. Additionally, much of the violence in *Better Call Saul* revolves around the parallel storylines focusing on Mike Ehrmantraut (Jonathan Banks), rather than Jimmy McGill.

[29] Peter Lyman, "The Domestication of Anger: The Use and Abuse of Anger in Politics," *European Journal of Social Theory* 7, no. 2 (2004), 145.

[30] Day-Mayer and Mayer, "Performing/Acting Melodrama," 103.

[31] Mason, *Melodrama and the Myth of America,* 17.

[32] Eder, Jannidis, and Schneider, *Characters in Fictional Worlds,* 24.

[33] Matthew Buckley, "Unbinding Melodrama," in *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures,* eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 16.