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### Breaking the Stereotypes

In countless novels and other forms of media, students are depicted as the protagonist of the story, while their teachers are merely portrayed in a small supporting role where they assist the student on their path to maturity. Although rare, the primary focus of a story is occasionally placed on the teacher, who receives the complexity that is usually left for the student protagonist. Vince Gilligan's television show "Breaking Bad" and Michael Chabon's *Wonder Boys* provide two examples of plots that revolve around the life of a teacher, developing a complexity that allows the audience to view their characters for more than just "good" or "bad" teachers. In different ways, these two plots also illustrate teachers as very poor role models, demonstrating a negative stereotype teachers seem to frequently face in fiction, which is generally a fantasy designed to make the story and the lives of teachers more interesting. As a result, the teachers in these two storylines live action-packed lives, but fail to perform as "good" teachers.

In "Breaking Bad", a high school chemistry teacher named Walter White is introduced as the main character of the television show. At first glimpse, he appears to be a very normal teacher with little complexity. He is brilliant and uses exciting demonstrations in his chemistry class, but he is an otherwise ordinary teacher, who also works at a car wash to make money in order to support his family. As the primary attention of the show is placed on Mr. White and not on one of his students, which is uncommon compared to most works of fiction, his

character is given an immense amount of complexity. Instead of merely being the “good” teacher who guides one of his students in their coming of age story, the show takes a dark turn and evolves Walter into a truly multifaceted character.

One day while Mr. White is working at the car wash, he collapses and discovers that he has inoperable lung cancer. Deciding that he needs to add some excitement to his life, Walter goes for a ride with Hank, a DEA agent and his brother-in-law, during a DEA operation. While going along for the ride, Walt learns about the profitability of methamphetamine and at one of the scenes he discovers that one of his former students named Jesse Pinkman deals drugs. Walt ends up putting these two ideas together and decides that the best way to provide stability for his family’s financial future given his medical condition is to produce and sell methamphetamine. This moment alone makes Walter White more complex than most teachers in fiction, but the resulting storyline takes the complexity of his character even further and begins to show that he is not a great teacher.

As Walter moves into drug dealing with his student, he no longer spends his days as a formal teacher within a classroom, but he still serves as a teacher to Jesse in a more informal capacity. Through the first three seasons of the show, the two develop their business of cooking and selling meth. They start out their business in a RV camper and eventually work their way into operating a multi-million dollar lab funded by an associate of the Mexican drug cartel. Walt uses his superior chemistry skills to produce very high quality methamphetamine, while Jesse uses his knowledge of drug dealing to help them be successful. Along the way, the two are involved in a variety of crimes and they work with several different individuals, who typically end up being killed by Walt and Jesse. Despite their illegal activities, as a teacher, Walt fails to

inspire Jesse to make him realize that he is capable of learning more and living a better life.

Instead Walt merely asserts his superior intelligence onto Jesse, failing to help him with his drug addiction and forcing him to do a lot of dirty work, rather than mold him into something better than himself. This element of the storyline shows that Walter White is a bad teacher, but the surrounding storyline shows that he is much more than that: he is a criminal, a liar, and a murder, which makes him significantly more complex than teachers in most works of fiction.

While Walter White was not initially painted in a negative light, in *Wonder Boys*, Grady Tripp is a professor at a university in Pittsburgh who is almost immediately shown to be a poor teacher, or a bad role model at the very least. After a writing workshop in his class, he originally makes an observation like a good teacher would by realizing that James Leer, one of his students, took the criticism from the workshop particularly hard. Unfortunately, he fails to do anything about it and states, “he seemed to want to hear the sound of my voice; but I was in a hurry to get to the airport and irritated with him for being such a god-damn spook all the time, and so I only said good-bye to him and started out the door” (4). Rather than console his student, or provide him with any sort of help, Grady simply shuts the lights out and leaves his student sitting in the dark. Even though it is immediately apparent that he is not a fantastic teacher, theoretically, the story could still follow the common trend of many fictional stories about school by focusing on James Leer’s growth with the assistance of Grady. However, like “Breaking Bad”, *Wonder Boys* focuses on Grady instead, turning him into a dynamic character beyond his basic label as a “bad” teacher.

Aside from his work inside the classroom, Grady Tripp is also in his seventh year of struggling to complete a lengthy novel he undertook, which now sits at “two thousand six

hundred and eleven pages” (12). Meanwhile, he is also in his third marriage, which is also failing and he spends the majority of his spare time smoking marijuana. Neither of these items directly reflects his teaching ability, however, it is immediately apparent that he is a bad role model. As the storyline unfolds, more complexity is added to his character, especially as a series of unfortunate events begin to plague Grady. After cheating on his wife with his boss named Sara Gaskell, he attends a party at his boss’ house with his student James. Upon arriving at the party Grady is informed by his boss that she is now pregnant and shortly after, James shoots and kills the Gaskell’s dog and steals expensive memorabilia from the house. As a result of these events, Grady is required to hide evidence in his trunk and keep secrets in order to protect himself and James’ future. Eventually his trunk is packed with ridiculous things such as his boss’ dead dog, a dead snake, and a tuba. At this point it is clear that Grady is living a pretty unrealistic life for a teacher, but the story continues to get crazier and he winds up injuring himself by flipping over a railing and falling onto the seats below. At the very least, this is quite the abnormal weekend, but it is pretty apparent that Grady is more complex than a standard teacher. In the process of these events Grady realizes that making things right requires honesty and difficult choices, which he discovers at the culmination of the story when he realizes he needs to make things right with Sara. Grady’s positive personal growth amidst the chaos of the story furthers his complexity as a character, but unfortunately his teaching remains poor, despite developing a better relationship with James.

In each of these fictional storylines, the teachers take the role of protagonist or antagonist, evolving as the story progresses, which leads to the creation of a deeper complexity than most teachers tend to receive in fictional stories. Neither Walter White, nor Grady Tripp

take the standard role of a teacher who guides one of their students to success, while taking on a background role. Instead, both of these teachers are at the forefront of the story and develop into complex characters with lives that primarily exist beyond the classroom. However, the scenarios that Walter White and Grady Tripp are placed in are completely unrealistic and stem from fantasy instead of realistic portrayals of teachers. Instead, these portrayals show fun fantasies of completely unrealistic scenarios that are exciting for readers to think about.

Teaching is not always viewed as the most glamorous or exciting profession, but this provides writers with the opportunity to explore imaginary scenarios to make the profession more interesting. In both instances this leads to characters that not only make poor decisions, but also they also partake in highly illegal activities. A teacher becoming a highly successful drug manufacturer and seller, or a teacher who cheats on his wife with his boss and uses drugs frequently tends to be significantly more interesting than a fictional story about a perfect teacher who merely helps each of his students reach their potential. In both of these stories the teacher not only spends the majority of their time outside the classroom, but they both fail to serve as “good” teachers to their students. Even with their similarities, there are some differences between these two storylines as well. In “Breaking Bad” Walter White’s story takes on a much darker side, while Grady Tripp’s story in *Wonder Boys* is much more light-hearted and humorous. “Breaking Bad” takes place during two-year time span whereas *Wonder Boys* takes place over the duration of a single weekend, which provides a much greater opportunity for complexity and growth in Walter White’s character. Furthermore, Walter is guided into his complex role primarily as a result of his cancer diagnosis, whereas Grady Tripp’s complexity starts as a result of numerous ongoing problems that seem to plague him. Despite their

differences, both of these fictional storylines provide insight to the way teachers are portrayed in fiction. They both demonstrate larger ideas about teaching, as a result of the primary focus of these stories being on the teachers instead of their students.

As a result of its lack of boundaries, fiction is capable of developing powerful and complex worlds and characters that do not have to coincide with societal norms. Although these are only two examples of situations in which teachers are the primary recipients of characterization, both of these examples show that teachers are just as capable of being complex literary figures even though it tends to be a slightly more rare occurrence. Both Walter White and Grady Tripp are given very negative connotations that seem to represent fantastical ideas about teachers. Without these unusual plots, their roles would generally be boring in comparison to these two storylines, but it shows that teachers are capable of being complex to the point of being more than just “good” or “bad” teachers. Unfortunately, in these two instances, our teachers are undoubtedly bad teachers, but perhaps this shows a need to reprioritize the way in which we illustrate our educational system. In an ideal world, all teachers would be perfect and would guide their students to success, but in reality, bad teachers also exist and it is important to remember that. In order to improve our educational system in the United States, we would first have to accept this reality that not all teachers are great at what they do, but that does not mean that teachers are always criminals. Nevertheless, while the majority of teachers do not spend drug filled weekends making poor decisions and they also rarely spend their time cooking methamphetamines, there is always more to teachers than what exists inside the classroom.