

LIBERAL DERADICALIZATION IN THE ADAPTATION OF NOVELS TO FILM:  
DEFINING ANTIHEROES, FROM HEATHCLIFF TO WALTER WHITE

By

Benjamin Kraft

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APPROVED

Dr. Richard Carr, Committee Chair

Dr. Alexander Hirsch, Committee Member

Dr. Eileen Hamey, Committee Member

Dr. Chris Coffman, Chair

*Department of English*

Dr. Ellen Lopez, Dean

*College of Liberal Arts*

Dr. Richard Collins, *Director of the Graduate School*



## Abstract

Using research from the history of the Victorian novel and recent media, I demonstrate the value in re-examining the critical importance of the antihero. Using a methodology of combining neo-Marxian analysis, adaptation studies, and a re-thinking of what constitutes novels and television serials, I explore how antiheroes are defined and why those definitions are often not inclusive to controversial, but seemingly definitional antihero examples. As informed by a critique of how antiheroes are defined, I use my research to discuss the underlying characteristics of the antihero across genres. From a perspective of critiquing liberalism adopted from Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Vince Gilligan's *Breaking Bad*, I structure textual evidence in support of antiheroes being identified according to three traits: sympathy, violence, and radical speech.

The literary and real-world impact of each trait is argued according to evidence qualified by a neo-Marxian methodology, using an original synthesis of Louis Althusser's aleatory politics and the Marxist cultural critiques of Raymond Williams. Finally, these three traits are strongly evinced in the real-world systemic critiques of liberalism represented in both Heathcliff and Walter White.

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Dedicated to My Father

## *Introduction: Three Conventions of Antiheroes in Heathcliff*

In many ways, the Victorian novel's effects are still visibly developing in modern media – which makes a certain sense, given that the Victorian novel itself grew from and alongside the development of stage conventions of the time, like melodrama and satire. The best novels of the Victorian period are likely to feature an antihero, often as the main character, and period screen adaptations of Victorian antiheroes effectively form their own subgenre. However, focus is sometimes limited in two distinct ways: First, the antihero is seldom defined in a way that applies across diverse examples; second, the comparison of Victorian (or other period) antiheroes to contemporary examples is too often limited to direct adaptations of source texts. Intertextual meanings can be derived from analysis of direct adaptation but isolating intertextual elements from disparate sources also yields valuable insights.

Therefore, the goal of this thesis is an exploration of how the two problems operate and how they interact – especially in relation to a particular facet of the antihero that I explore in detail: The antihero as a vessel for systemic critique. The result of my exploration is to support the claim that the antiheroic character, as a convention, necessarily carries such critique and is part of a process of adaptation where radical speech is altered into deradicalized forms.

The Victorian antihero is possibly best understood via Emily Brontë's Heathcliff. As an intentionally controversial comparison, but not so controversial that it lacks merit, I make the connection from Heathcliff's antiheroism to that of *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White. As a pair, the two at first would appear to have very little in common but, by deconstructing *how* the antihero is defined, I demonstrate that disparate examples are more helpful than similar examples. Further, controversial comparison is a neo-Marxian methodological choice

specifically meant to help identify why systemic interests have a motivation to propagate characters whose popular consumption may likely result in critical discourse.

Heathcliff and Walter's antiheroism matches the sentiment of what an antihero means in the popular reading of the term, in that both characters evoke powerful, irreconcilable emotional responses: Audiences love to see master plans carried out, despite the disgust entailed with how those plans use or result in violence, death, and manipulation. Both Heathcliff and Walter use violence as a function to gain more power over others, even if the violence is being used against them; as the target, the antihero's most common generation of sympathy occurs through the way they satisfy the audience's desire for reacting to injustices with equal or greater force. Whereas, in general terms, a hero may often seek to resolve or end violence, the antihero just as often perpetuates and escalates conflict. Therefore, recognizing how the antihero relates to violence is the first point of reference in this re-thinking of antiheroes.

Violence is crucial to the antihero because it is the connection between the sympathetic love of watching the antihero and the disgust at or disapproval of the consequences of their actions. Sympathy for reprehensible violent acts in an unjust system plays well in the melodramatic constructedness of the Victorian novel, isolating the antihero's radical elements in ways that the reading public can comprehend. That narrative structure uses radical speech according to what David Bordwell called the "narrational mode," "a historically distinct set of norms of narrational construction and comprehension" (155). Radical narrational mode, as abundantly seen in *Heights*, takes the form of violent conflict. Hence, my intended contribution to antihero study is to show that adaptations of antiheroes indicate a strong pattern of

systemic critique – with the consequent observation of how that same critique is deradicalized in adaptation.

To bring *Wuthering Heights* and *Breaking Bad* into the context of radical speech and identify what is radical about Heathcliff and Walter White, I must first establish how the two characters are, in fact, antiheroic – but, as from the start, the problem of defining the term 'antihero' in technical, inclusive detail arises almost immediately. Examples of how the antihero's definition becomes a problem are numerous, but two examples suffice. Culea and Suci's "Between Grand Dreams and Big Failure: The Anti-Hero in English Literature and Culture" uses Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* to define an antihero as "... the opposite of the traditional chief character of a [novel]; the anti-hero or the 'non-hero' does not ... evoke strength, bravery, resourcefulness or nobility of mind and character" (1). Second, influential twentieth century critic Northrop Frye centralized the antihero as a foil to his hero plot-type, in which heroes fit four different sub-types; "divine being," "high mimetic," "low mimetic," or "the ironic mode" (32-33). His antihero subtypes are failed versions of one of these four. The antihero only exists as a misrepresentation of hero categories in these typical examples, but glaring examples infringe upon Frye, as well as Culea and Suci. Characters such as Homer's Thersites, Hardy's Tess Durbeyfield, Mitchell's Scarlett O'Hara, and Dostoyevsky's Underground Man each fail the definitions and types set out above, yet each of these characters can be seen as antiheroes – in some cases, seeing them any other way requires intensive recontextualization and possibly unreliable interpretation.

Despite their limitations, both scholarly citations touch upon the key undercurrent in antiheroism; representation of and controversial relation to real-world values. The context

surrounding a given antihero is key, hence the narrowing of focus upon two examples only, with the aim of identifying connections between the two.

*Wuthering Heights* can be read in various ways, given Brontë's family history, historical period, and her own role as a political thinker. In the countless readings of *Heights*, Heathcliff's status as hero, antihero, or some other category is not at all settled. Though it may not be the stereotypical view of Brontë, I will start with two assumptions. She will be assumed here to be as complex a political writer as any other major Victorian authors with her writing standing as the only necessary evidence for the assumption. In that writing, the second assumption is that Heathcliff is an antihero due to three general traits prevalently found in other characters widely identified as Victorian antiheroes: Illicit sympathy, dependence on violence, and relation to radical speech.<sup>1</sup>

Viewing Heathcliff as an antihero, radical representations become the apparent fabric of the novel. *Wuthering Heights* begins with the unflattering representation of the landlord. The liberal gentleman tenant, Lockwood, rents Thrushcross Grange despite its status as a countryside estate far from anything he knows. Lockwood's visits to his landlord rapidly become encounters with abusive behaviors and hints of psychological horrors. These horrors are the result of long-past plot; Lockwood and the reader arrive after the fact, not in *media res*. Very little of *Wuthering Heights* occurs in the present. The disorienting reality is only compounded by Lockwood's gentlemanly status as something of a luckless city dimwit, out of his element in the oppressive rural world.

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<sup>1</sup> The antihero's relation to radical speech can take two forms, direct and representative; direct radical speech would include the character serving as the literal speaker of radicalism, whereas the representative relation is formed around behavior symbolic of real-world characteristics.

Going forward, certain terms will be heavily relied upon relating to the 'liberal order' of the Victorian period. The above synopsis of Brontë's introduction is purposefully focused upon elements that lend themselves well to a Marxist reading. From the first pages, Brontë's themes of class, place, and origins sustain her critiques that form the plot of the novel, and which will be explored according to the terminology informed by a neo-Marxian methodology. The contemporary terminology is here structured according to a historical view of the Victorian class system.

### *Section I: Raymond Williams and the 'Liberal Order'*

The 'liberal order' is defined as those individuals who have a decisive power and influence within the system of Victorian liberalism, relative to their status as legitimized wealth-earners. Liberalism emerged from the pre-Victorian imperialist conservatism that dominated culture, economics, and politics in the western world. The rise of liberalism coincided with, and in some senses produced, the emergence of a rapidly expanding middle class. Class division, property ownership, wealth legitimization (and delegitimization), and rapid expansion of both markets and new cultural norms are the elements of liberalism most focused upon in Victorian literature, Brontë especially. For Brontë, these liberal traits, the liberal order, and the way in which the order wields and enforces the traits as systemic power functions, are all based in violence.

Far different from her somewhat more reactionary sisters, Emily Brontë's characters were vessels for critiques of the system of liberalism itself beyond the individuals who populated it. The Victorian economic culture saw a proliferating of new levels of income for non-elites, where the sources that provided wealth had a strong influence on an individual's expected behavior. Much of Heathcliff's character arc is constructed according to the spread of middle-class culture from the urban sprawl and into the resistant rural beyond; his identity rests at the divide where liberalism and conservatism converge, as shown when Mr. Earnshaw extracts him from the streets of the rapidly expanding city of Liverpool and takes him to the heath, a world in which Heathcliff is so illiterate that he could not even speak to his new family.

The requirement of literacy in social mobility is a theme of the Brontës, where regimentation of the class structure according to literate behavior sets can be seen in such

places as Thrushcross Grange. As a landlord's estate, the Grange represents the middle class's duality of the time as a tense combination of both lower-class workers and upper-class elites, existing in the early adoption of city sentiment despite its obvious incompatibility with rural subsistence. The strongest defining feature of the middle class is its split identity between lower and higher – both exploiting and depending on the other.

To generalize such a class structure, Brontë's world can be thought of as a system populated by an order. The structure of the liberal system is filled by this order according to a hierarchical way of qualifying the authority among the order members – qualification such as gender, wealth, and family. For instance, the source of wealth is key to an individual's social power in the novel, even if that wealth is less substantial than someone else of equal or lesser social power. Heathcliff's mysterious time away establishes Brontë's view that the unknown source of wealth is still cause for keeping him in a place of discredit, whereas the likely less independently wealthy but socially authoritative Edgar still commands some respect over Heathcliff in society even after Heathcliff returns – Heathcliff's status as a gentleman cannot be proven except by such expressions of wealth, such as appearance and demeanor. Brontë lists some of the less-approved wealth accumulation methods of the period as characters try to determine how Heathcliff made his fortune: Soldiering, mercenary work, work in the Americas, and, perhaps the most likely, (though not stated in the text as an explicit possibility) the slave trade that was still prevalent in the British colonies.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> As an aside, my sub-argument regarding the nature of the liberal system to be existentially dependent on violence bears certain similarity to an Antipodean observation, as summarized in Boucher. Namely, that orthodox historians writing of the Victorian period traditionally elided British imperialism away from any strong relationship to the urban rise of liberalism (historians who were chiefly British). The relationship between liberalism and imperialism, from a more historical viewpoint, is perhaps another clear piece of evidence to illustrate what Brontë did by making Heathcliff's wealth ambiguous: liberalism's interest in wealth over source is indicative of liberalism's

Rereading *Wuthering Heights* with a Marxist perspective makes new connections possible between the novel's themes of violence, liberal critique, and the place of the antihero – not just in the Victorian period, but past it. Brontë scholarship, as in Anat Rosenberg's "Liberal Anguish," identifies the novel's dual setting of the Heights and the Grange as a mapping of liberalism during a time of its most visible machination – expansion into the rural. Heathcliff's household properties immediately lay themselves out in a hierarchy in which the members of the house represent a familiarly ordered class structure.

With Heathcliff at the pinnacle of power in ownership and liberal freedom, the other characters are under constant threat of his violence. Catherine the younger is beaten across the face repeatedly, to "chastise" her, with the abuse going well beyond discipline. Unlike the time before Cathy's death, when the liberal order could reasonably resist Heathcliff, he is now at the peak of the liberal system and his violence is therefore justified by authoritative power – a violence over which he maintains a recognized monopoly. Hareton, though strong and capable, takes considerable time to come to Catherine's defense – challenging the monopoly, though he does so by pleading and not by physical force.

Heathcliff's attacks are most established as a monopoly and a function for gaining power when others attack him. Hareton's pleading for Catherine is a significant break from that

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core of sovereignty-based proto-authoritarianism (i.e., *prima facie* imperialism). See Boucher, where "[even] metropolitan liberals of the 1860s noted that the settler colonies of empire had functioned as laboratories of liberal democracy" (36). It is proposed that there is no evidence to suggest that Brontë, possibly without access to or need for the language of strict political theory, was not well-aware of what she was doing. Leaving his wealth to obscurity allows Brontë to carry out her critique that the system of liberalism depends on wealth regardless of its source, even if it is illicit. The characters are members of the liberal order, with the properties representing a system where members can be replaced without any significant functional change to the system – even if violently replaced. Like Marx's critique of capitalism as dependent on constant expansion and routine crisis, the violent element within liberalism of the Victorian period is here targeted not as incidental, but essential to both liberalism and imperialism.

moment, and only works because of her resemblance to Cathy the elder. In another instance earlier in the novel, but that provides crucial context for Heathcliff's violent behavior, Isabella becomes a focal character in a conversation with Nelly Dean.<sup>3</sup> When Heathcliff returns from Cathy's grave, Hindley confides in Isabella that "[y]ou and I... have each a great debt to settle with the man out yonder! If we were neither of us cowards, we might combine to discharge it." Isabella, however, is potentially the only character to rationally understand, ultimately, that using violence on Heathcliff has a very specific pattern of consequences: "I'd be glad of a retaliation that wouldn't recoil on myself; but treachery and violence are spears pointed at both ends." Hindley's plan to kill Heathcliff, motivated by Cathy's death, causes Isabella to warn Heathcliff through the window. In a much-adapted scene, Hindley attempts murder with pistol and knife, with Heathcliff besting him and forcing his way in through the window: Heathcliff's monopoly on violence is asserted, but his expression of power is in his reaction. Heathcliff savagely beats Hindley after winning the fight but takes the time to stop and bind Hindley's wounds, keeping him alive – illustrating that Hindley's life or death is decided by Heathcliff. Joseph vows to go to Edgar, who is the magistrate, over the attack – but Isabella must explain that Hindley, not Heathcliff, was the aggressor, proving her point about Heathcliff's increasingly violent power and the risk of acting against it.

Many characters are similarly affected by Heathcliff's ability to gain power by reacting to violence with greater violence. Heathcliff targets moments of potential resistance, moments that are found in what Niklas Luhmann calls liberal complexity. Complexity refers to the "'lived culture' or 'the socio-cultural process' ... [and] consists of a potentially infinite number of social

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<sup>3</sup> The family housekeeper originally to the Earnshaws, later to the Lintons, and lastly to Heathcliff.

and artistic practices, relationships, values, and documents." The relationships within this socio-cultural process are brought into conflict by liberal ownership; the power of ownership allows the differences in relationships to be objectified into conflict, which the owner may intervene in and prolong for profit<sup>4</sup> (Hartley). In the context of the novel, this complexity manifests when violence against Heathcliff utterly fails. As the antihero created from that same violence, he both understands and wields the ability to profit from conflict. His claims to defensive action reinforce his claims over property in each instance.

To borrow from Rosenberg, complexity in *Heights* is identifiable through "[t]he existence of apparently contradictory yet intertwined conceptual commitments" (1), with such Victorian renderings of liberalism arising from the critique of these incompatible commitments. Some of these commitments range as broadly as "progress and hierarchy, freedom and subjection, optimism and bleakness, control and arbitrariness, reason and emotion..." (2), and, though unmentioned, masculine and feminine. *Wuthering Heights* takes the liberalizing real-world Victorian era, identifies its complexities, and narrativizes those complexities into comprehensible forms for the reading public. Brontë's use of psychological realism is ideal for setting up the conditions of liberal complexity, because psychological realism is the sustained focus on internal, melodramatic traits across characters – from their emotional commitments to ideological presumptions.

Returning to the novel to apply the terminology so far, by the time of Lockwood's arrival, Heathcliff's power over the others has reached its peak. The metaphor of liberalism is mapped by Heathcliff's power-seeking, with his opportunities to gain more power allowing a glimpse

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<sup>4</sup> In the case of Heathcliff, to acquire property which would never be willingly sold to him.

into the structure that Heathcliff seeks to control. Liberalism has an inherent need for complexity; can be understood based on incompatible behavior patterns, internal conflict, and benefitting from delayed resolution. In *Heights*, the behavior patterns in question are necessary activities, often essential parts of the character – such as Cathy's pursuit of two men, Heathcliff's desire for Cathy and revenge, or Catherine the younger's attempts to appease the deceitful Linton. Liberalism turns relations between subjects into encounters that can be exploited, from daily interpersonal activity to intricate ideological norms.

The highest level of liberal complexity is found in the powerful members of the elite. The relationship of the liberal order to the liberal system becomes more apparently encounter-based, or aleatory, according to Louis Althusser's philosophy of the encounter. Viewed historically, the dependence of liberalism on markets and competition conjures a façade of stability and unimpeded growth, but the incompatibility of the order's behavior patterns is not incidental or only on the surface: The incompatibility is a result of the system's most basic ontological conflicts.

To illustrate, *Wuthering Heights* repeatedly refers to the Victorian manner of inheritance and fear of miscegenation. Hindley's fear of Heathcliff as a usurper is legitimized by Heathcliff's outsider status. Internal tension is justified by perceived external threat, regardless of whether that threat exists or is merely implied. When Heathcliff leaves and returns, he is made into the external threat from Hindley and the Lintons' perspective, as he brings the threat of the outside world into the rural. Upon seeing that the others recognize him as a threat, Heathcliff exploits their fears and turns Cathy against them. Heathcliff repeats this pattern of violent subversion until he is master of the hierarchy.

At the end of the novel, Catherine and Hareton being forced together results in a mirroring of Heathcliff and Cathy as children – unlikely friends that unite against the oppressions of those above them. Catherine offers to teach Hareton to read and write, resulting in Hareton taking a stand against Heathcliff if he raises a hand against Catherine. Until that point, Heathcliff has tolerated their behavior against him – but, once they began to unite as friends, he attempts to forcibly prevent the friendship:

[Heathcliff] had his hand in [Catherine's] hair; Hareton attempted to release her locks, entreating him not to hurt her that once. Heathcliff's black eyes flashed; he seemed ready to tear Catherine in pieces, [but] gazed intently in her face... and turning anew to Catherine, said, with assumed calmness— "You must learn to avoid putting me in a passion, or I shall really murder you some time! Go with Mrs. Dean, and keep with her; and confine your insolence to her ears. As to Hareton Earnshaw, if I see him listen to you, I'll send him seeking his bread where he can get it! Your love will make him an outcast and a beggar. Nelly, take her; and leave me, all of you! Leave me!"

Heathcliff's sudden change emerges from his unexpected remembrance of his own youth with Cathy. "Hareton seemed a personification of my youth, not a human being; I felt to him in such a variety of ways, that it would have been impossible to have accosted him rationally," Heathcliff states later to Nelly, the first moment he intimates that he may be already defeated due to his anguish and perhaps even possesses sympathy for Hareton. He goes so far as to imply that his scheme had been to murder the inhabitants of his properties. Despite the monstrous nature of Heathcliff's behavior and intention, it is possible that these passages rekindle the audience's sympathy for Heathcliff. Potential sympathy for Heathcliff, rather than

anything like redemption (which he laughs at when Nelly suggests such a thing), returns from the previous parts of the novel as evidence that Heathcliff remains antiheroic.

By tracking the functions of the liberal system, I can use the technical details of the novel's political implications as a focusing lens to re-examine antiheroism more specifically. Heathcliff's character arc is a powerful example of three antiheroic traits that can be generalized when considering other antiheroes and how they are defined.

Heathcliff is used as a vessel for liberal critique. He provides strong evidence that such a role as vessel for societal/social/moral criticism could be central to the antihero. Here, three specific traits that Brontë exemplified using Heathcliff – and used as systemic critiques of Victorian society – will be explored as the center of discussion. Of the three traits explored here – sympathy, violence, and radicalism – I posit radical speech as the most important element of antiheroes. As a generalizable base to start from, radical speech will be contextualized from a synthesis of ideas explored within complexity, the liberal order, and critique: Specifically, radical speech is anything recognized by systemic power to constitute a possible threat, with systemic recognition matching quite closely to Althusser's interpellation.<sup>5</sup> The purposeful result of encountering the threat is to make it a subject of systemic interests; to commodify what can be exploited, eliminate existential threats, and elevate that which is beyond the system's power to exploit or destroy.

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<sup>5</sup> Interpellation being the process in which subjects experience and internalize ideology, with the focus here being on how a system exploits interpellative relations further in order to create complexity; the philosophy of the encounter is interpreted here as a shift from primary focus on the subject experiencing interpellation, and into generalizations about the nature of encounters and systemic intervention.

Specific radical ideas such as liberal (or other systemic) critique seem inherent to antiheroes. Brontë is a useful source because she reduces the complexities of liberalism to understandable conflicts that are applicable across fields. Further, Heathcliff goes beyond merely representing such conflict and allows for in-depth analysis of the antihero's structural impact on systems as an aleatory change agent.

Heathcliff is the result of vague, but obvious trauma – coming home with Mr. Earnshaw from the streets, the foundling boy is variously interpreted by the audience and other characters. It is possible he is Earnshaw's bastard, explaining Hindley's hatred from a place of threatened inheritance; he can be interpreted as an orphan adrift on the streets of Europe, with no place in the society Earnshaw brings him into; his physical appearance provides any number of readings firmly existing in the realm of possibility, with many of his features seemingly contradictory and otherizing. Heathcliff's origins are compounded in their multiplicities of difference from the other children when Nelly Dean says to him:

Do you mark those two lines between your eyes; and those thick brows, that, instead of rising arched, sink in the middle; and that couple of black fiends, so deeply buried, who never open their windows boldly, but lurk glinting under them, like devil's spies? Wish and learn to smooth away the surly wrinkles, to raise your lids frankly, and change the fiends to confident, innocent angels, suspecting and doubting nothing, and always seeing friends where they are not sure of foes. ...

A good heart will help you to a bonny face, my lad ... if you were a regular black; and a bad one will turn the bonniest into something worse than ugly. ... Who knows but your father was Emperor of China, and your mother an Indian queen, each of them able to

buy up, with one week's income, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange together?

(ch. VII)<sup>6</sup>

Nelly codifies Heathcliff's character in a single, neat foundation that immediately challenges the audience with a new sympathetic view of him. Sympathy, as the most common first trait of antiheroism, comes from a place of being painfully aware of abuse and also of audience curiosity to know the withheld origins of the character.

Heathcliff returns with even more obscurity than he left with, using it as a profitable mystique. It is not only Heathcliff's actions, but his wealth-source that allows him to upset the Victorian class system's preoccupation with wealth. He does not have a known, culturally accepted income. Heathcliff may be "divested of roughness, though stern for grace," but his unknown status is a source of fear for other masculine members of the hierarchy – a fear indicative of his position outside class. As a change agent challenging the powerful, Heathcliff stands apart from class – though never so far that he cannot manipulate it to his ends.

Heathcliff's claims upon violence are not merely destructive but convey a deeper function of the liberal system than any of the other characters.

Heathcliff does not only become the abuser, but he also systematically destroys and *reconstructs* the liberal order. His exploitation of aleatory violence – of targeting and prolonging

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<sup>6</sup> Tytler's article "Physiognomy in *Wuthering Heights*" argues the likelihood of Emily Brontë being familiar with Victorian England's pseudo-science of racial phrenology, as supported by Charlotte Brontë's own novels containing many phrenological passages (Tytler 137). As support for Emily's critique of the liberal system via Heathcliff, it is especially notable, though still an aside point to this thesis, that Nelly Dean's monologue runs counter to the phrenological views typical of the time and that liberal history (and liberal present) is rife with. Not only is Heathcliff's ethnicity left vague by the text, leaving his whiteness or otherness up to interpretation, but if he is white then his later heinousness rejects the phrenological idea that whiteness produces virtue; and, if he is non-white, then his material circumstances take explanatory significance more so than his race. Whether by design or merely by interaction of the conventions she deployed (likely the former), Emily Brontë succeeded in rejecting the physiognomic race politics of the time using its own style of physical description.

conflicts to gain power and profit from them – breaks down the liberal order and ousts members, replacing them with himself.<sup>7</sup> He is not merely destroying others; he is expanding and recreating the social system according to a hierarchy that replaces the old power referents with more powerful alternatives – elevating himself ever higher until he is at the top of the hierarchy. From the perspective of the system's interests, Heathcliff's destructive behavior is a net benefit, as he is reifying and expanding the previously stagnant class structure – just as liberalism did to the world around Brontë.

Sympathy, violence, and radicalism are each visible in Heathcliff's character, but I argue their connective tissue – the reason his character resonates in each trait's combination with the others – strongly relates to the representation of actual, class-conscious societal observations. An antihero's success with the audience relies heavily on the radical contents found in the interactions with the real world, a point which Heathcliff demonstrates in how *Wuthering Heights* was received.

Rosenberg identifies in *Wuthering Heights* the achievement of a radical "aesthetic enactment of the anguish that liberal structures of complexity were to evoke for generations to follow – the modern anguish of incomprehensibility and eruption at the heart of a liberal order, experienced already at the novel's troubled reception" (3). Negative critical response to *Wuthering Heights* at the time ranged from disgust to denial of its authenticity. Brontë's

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* is borrowed from here with one critical adjustment; the role of the masculine within the system. With Cathy Linton in perspective alongside Heathcliff, her antiheroism is almost equal to his with one key difference being that it is difficult to imagine that she could wield violence in equivalent ways with equivalent system-regenerative effect. It is not only wealth, sympathy, and radicalism – Cathy has all of that and maybe more – but also the system's interpellative relation to the identities of subjects, such as gendered roles. Other works on antiheroic feminine characters, such as Somerville and Ross's *The Real Charlotte*, Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master & Margarita*, and the character Jesse Pinkman in *Breaking Bad*, further evince this relationship of violence to gender roles.

controversial imagery was rejected, as the possibility that a woman, let alone a sheltered girl, could have written the novel aroused reactionary suspicion among editors.<sup>8</sup> Reader interpretations of *Heights* as a radical text may be less common today, partially due to its status as a staple of canon, but the contemporary Victorian reviewers of Brontë's time are the best evidence for understanding why the text was considered radical upon its publication. I use 'radical' as a term to mean any influence which is reacted to by powerful systems as a threat to the system's interests. Brontë's representations fit quite well to critiques outside of her time period, including critiques of gender representation, heteronormative marriage, and hierarchal sexual politics. Topics of gender and marriage were frequently commented on by editors and reviewers. An early review from *The Spectator* in 1847 stated that the book's "incidents are too coarse and disagreeable to be attractive, the very best being improbable, with a moral taint about them, and the villainy not leading to results sufficient to justify the elaborate pains taken in depicting it," and *Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper* decrying "[t]he women in the book are of a strange fiendish-angelic nature, tantalising, and terrible, and the men are indescribable..." *Paterson's Magazine* went as far as to urge readers to "Read *Jane Eyre*... but burn *Wuthering Heights*" (Collins).

Critical responses can illustrate evidence of radical content. The rhetorical packaging of their wording indicates where the concerns of the critics lie. As literacy sponsors of the reading public, reviewers (members of the liberal order) are not merely policing taste – they are

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<sup>8</sup> For more on the attitude of editors toward the reading public, see *Physiology of the Novel* by Dames. The publishing industry were ideological vanguards in the production of desired democratic citizens. Requirements to alter manuscript submissions were commonplace and women's publishing faced gender barriers that influenced all of the Brontë sisters to write under male pennames.

Interpellating radical texts to condition ideological groups. Reviews do not evince how readers themselves receive a novel, but they do indicate the systemic reception of a novel. Antiheroes, as vessels of radical ideas, are not being misunderstood and therefore discarded – the ideas the antiheroes represent are being explicitly rejected. The reading public is partially defined by novel reading and hence by the relation of the publishing industry to enforce specific, politically motivated narrational modes.<sup>9</sup> As evidence of an ideological apparatus reacting to a text, the early reviews of *Wuthering Heights* show more than simply emotive disgust – they indicate reactionary rejection of radical representations. They indicate that the novel was aesthetically displeasing, perhaps honestly – but also to invoke that its themes were too radical.

As a final example to tie each of the review responses to the antihero, the essential takeaway from reviews is found in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*. An anonymous reviewer asks of novels, "... do they teach mankind to avoid one course and to take another? Do they dissect any portion of existing society, exhibiting together its weak and its strong points? If these questions were asked regarding *Wuthering Heights*, there could not be an affirmative answer given" (Troup 138). The key problem many early reviews had with *Heights* was its lack of clear moral guidance – even if they would likely disagree, readers allegedly need to be told why such vague values were necessary. The novel reviewer shows that Brontë challenged the assumptions not just of the novel as a technology for transmitting specific ideological ideas, but further used the antihero's qualities to challenge liberal ideology itself.

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<sup>9</sup> From Bordwell, a set of expectations that readers have of their consumed texts, as inherited by reading practices, literate behavior norms, and industry restrictions.

In sum, radical speech and the other two traits connect in Heathcliff's origin to show that antiheroism has a powerful connection to the real-world system in question. Also, the three traits indicate that a result of antiheroism is systemic regeneration. The result of this close reading of Heathcliff is that, first, antiheroic traits do not exist in a binary with heroic traits; second, antiheroism is a reaction to systemic abuse in combination with pre-existing controversial character traits, especially if the abuse puts the antihero in a dilemma preventing them from achieving a sympathetic desire; and third, the antihero abuses the system to gain power within the system. Sympathy, violence, and radicalism may not be enough to define the antihero – but they are a good start in seeing how definition tracks across time. Going forward into the adaptations under consideration, part of the goal is to track these same traits and understand how they are used to recreate the success of the novel.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> As an afterword to the section, this thesis originally focused not only on Brontë, but an array of Victorian authors. The analysis of the antihero and the liberal order holds up almost identically, with minor variation and some significant additional observations; such as in Thackeray where even an antihero's questionable success still illustrates these same traits, or in Hardy, where the vessel of critique can be split between multiple characters (Tess, Angel, Alec). Adaptations of such authors also yielded similar observations of deradicalization. The same general applicability of my core argument goes beyond my chosen texts.

## *Section II: A Neo-Marxian Literary Perspective of Deradicalization in Adaptation*

The previous section ended with the evidence of Brontë's publication and critical reception. To follow up on her publication, my focus now is on adaptation. Adaptation is assumed here to be a re-interpretive literate act, in conjunction with the primary text's original reading audience. Building from the language of Thomas Leitch and Linda Hutcheon, the development of screen adaptation historically – separate from strictly the antiheroic – allows for questioning of the boundaries that define the adapted medium's goals and functions. Adaptation finishes the argumentative structure which will allow for a complete discussion of the modern antihero in *Breaking Bad*, and its surprisingly strong relations to the Victorian.

Audience literacy is a key concern for the adapter. In adapting a text whose central thematic purpose is the critique of the liberal system, the literacy capabilities of the audience<sup>11</sup> make the deradicalization process apparent. My argument begins in the point of the rhetorical process at which deradicalization happens, with *Wuthering Heights* adaptations serving as my primary evidence. One of the greater obstacles in adapting Brontë is psychological realism, which relies on conventions difficult to represent on-screen.

In 1957, George Bluestone stated that "the novel has tended to retreat more and more from external action to internal thought, from plot to character, from social to psychological realities" (46). Bluestone's is a useful perspective to remember in the face of the common impulse to behave as if novel-to-screen adaptation invariably requires simplification in 'bringing the characters to life.' Thomas Leitch restates Bluestone, clarifying that "studies of novels and movies have been shadowed by the assumption that novels are radically unadaptable to the

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<sup>11</sup> An audience which includes the reader, adapter, and the publishing system with which they interact.

screen because they are psychologically oriented" (110), with the history of Hollywood adaptations favoring the action, adventure, and romance found in genre novels to attract greater audience sizes while also appealing to critics. Departures from the trend that go into psychologically oriented stories and character pieces court critical discourse to redefine aspects of film away from popular entertainment and toward both academic and public perceptions of film as art.

Bluestone and Leitch identify the impulse to presume that adaptation simplifies because of the complexity of novels. Leitch's analysis of novel-to-screen "literary" films as constituting their own genre of adaptation hinges on his four criteria and one "anti-criteria." Leitch's anti-criteria is specifically that which is most often assumed in the expectations of the adaptational work, but which is peculiarly measured: "reverence for the source text" (114). Expanding on Leitch, audiences can expect true-to-the-book retelling when an adaptation is advertised, without that expectation ever being met and despite ample evidence to the contrary in other adaptations; the adaptation simplifies complex material and rejects via conscious omissions. Reverence does not imply that the adaptation "followed the book."<sup>12</sup>

To expand on Leitch's anti-criteria of reverence in a way that addresses change, Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* contains a surprising secondary argument: Adaptations, film in particular, must have a relationship to a source text – but that relationship has very little to

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<sup>12</sup> Leitch's exploration being qualifiedly different from my own, he does not mention what happens when reverence is excessive. Numerous infamous examples exist of period films that were accused of not reverent adaptation, but slavish recreation, such as Steven Zaillian's 2006 "All the King's Men" adaptation of Robert Penn Warren's novel of the same name. The film was critically panned and considered a failure despite being one of the truest adaptations of the novel's period. Relevantly, critics do not have to praise an adaptation for it to be a part of the adaptation genre, but rather must merely engage with it as if it were – even negatively. Direct adaptation of events, conventions, or words do not, of themselves, carry the same impacts when adapted between technologies.

do with 'truth' to the source text's claims, language, or aesthetics. Unlike Leitch's more specific forms of reverence an audience may recognize, a relationship to truth may be more rooted in less specific audience intuition. While 'remaining true to the source' in terms of setting and plot, an overall assessment of the most successful and impactful adaptations – especially period adaptations – shows that novel-to-film adaptation can have two incompatible traits: first, that the film's success exists within the reputation of the source; second, that significant changes to the plot, story, and themes are not merely coincidental, but perhaps essential. The two traits may seem contradictory, but the forthcoming overview of Brontë adaptations soon reveals that, contradictory or not, films and series which seek to 'correct' or improve the source text are either too controversial or rejected as failures.

Using those two traits – depending on reputation and change – the examples of adaptational deradicalization in *Heights* films can be broken down according to distinct categories.

The adaptations of *Wuthering Heights*, in major media productions from Hollywood studios or the BBC, trend toward a strong focus upon the novel's two most surface elements: Passionate romance and intense violence.<sup>13</sup> The first major adaptation, the Wyler film featuring Laurence Olivier and Merle Oberon, focuses much more purely on romance – Heathcliff's overall darkness being a result of pain at the situation into which he and Cathy have been forced. Wyler's film represents a category which rests both on dependence of the story's reputation and on heavy-handed changes.

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<sup>13</sup> Other adaptations exist in independent and non-film versions, from music to foreign retellings; however, the scope of this thesis, being founded in deradicalization of antiheroes as a means to understanding the defining of antiheroes, regrettably could not include such works.

The biggest change is that Heathcliff is the romantic hero, navigating the audience away from the political and social complexity which made the novel a unique brilliance. The reductive reputation of passionate romance is established early in the reviews of the novel and adaptations carry on that reputation. Exclusive focus on romance is apparent in the eavesdropping scene during which Heathcliff learns that Cathy has accepted Edgar's proposal. While nearly all of Cathy's lines are directly and reverently from the novel, certain parts are skipped. Nelly Dean's response, "[y]ou are ignorant of the duties you undertake in marrying; or else ... you are a wicked, unprincipled girl" in the novel is left out, replaced instead by ominous rain and thunder as Cathy speaks the words "I *am* Heathcliff." The lengthy passages of the novel are substituted with the foreshadowing that Cathy's incongruous feelings will result in deadly consequences. As an attempt to remain true to the text's complex emotions in the scene, the controversial language of gender and marriage norms is abandoned.

Just as with the novel's reviewers, the intention of the adapter in their creation is less important than the functions and interests that influence the product. From a market perspective, the film is a staggering success in that it not only captured the mystique of Heathcliff and Catherine's power – but it did so without any of Brontë's surgical dissection of that power which, coincidentally, is a critique of the very social systems that the film industry often serves to protect. At the moment of Heathcliff being held by the dying Cathy, the sympathy is almost entirely implied to be with Heathcliff. The end of the film, with far less death and violence than the source, has Heathcliff pursuing Cathy's 'ghost,' with the evil natures of wealth and failure to follow gender roles being the real culprits in immiserating the other characters. Heathcliff functions more like a hero by the end, where he resolves the

conflict by restoring order in a strengthened form. Adaptational tendency to remove complex elements can have the effect of also removing the critiques in the source – and unwittingly reinforce the ideas that were being critiqued.

Other screen versions in this category, such as Giedroyc's 2009 mini-series, show similar methods of reputation-dependence and change. The characteristics of the story's reputation, however, include a combination of the novel and the various adaptations, meaning that later versions depend on both the novel and previous adaptations. Wyler's impact on subsequent attempts is quite often apparent, especially in the eavesdropping scene and Cathy's death. Wyler's screenplay does not go far beyond the midpoint of the novel, leaving out most of the book after Cathy's death, though interestingly attempting to preserve its narrative framing.

Depending on source reverence is also characteristic of the second category, which does not rely on changes in the same way as Wyler. Whereas Wyler's purposeful focus on romance and passion left out certain source elements, this second category is defined by reducing elements as a result of compressing the plot into the run-time. The 1967 Sasdy adaptation represents this category, which attempts to maintain Hutcheon's "truth" while also reorganizing and condensing events. The content from the source material is seemingly chosen not by them or genre expectation, but rather by the importance it has to the story and how well it can be translated into film. The portrayal of Heathcliff by Ian McShane focuses on the out-of-place nature of Heathcliff at the Heights, choosing to provide answers to the novel's vagueness. Heathcliff is called a gypsy and a lascar; Mrs. Earnshaw accuses Mr. Earnshaw of "bringing home your bastard," and he heavily implies she is correct. Rightfully fearing for his inheritance, Hindley in particular is so far removed from the novel's violence and themes that

his character arc is virtually that of the hero in the text. By rendering Hindley in this way, Heathcliff falls into the space between antihero or villain and is not quite either. At the end of the mini-series, it is implied that Hindley offers Isabella his pistol; though it is unknown if she takes it, Heathcliff opens the door in a rage, a shot is fired, and Heathcliff is an implied ghost running after Cathy into the moors.

The change to antiheroism in Heathcliff is especially apparent in *Sasdy* because the representation of Brontë's radical ideas come through different avenues than antiheroism, but they are still present and strongly related to Heathcliff. The abuse that Heathcliff suffers from Hindley is far less personal and class-oriented, as Mr. Earnshaw is quite clearly an abusive disciplinarian who uses college to get rid of Hindley and may not even love him. As a result, Hindley is far more humanized than in most adaptations. When Hindley returns as master of the house and abuses Heathcliff, there is a complex combination of elements of learned behavior and striving to impress their father – Hindley going so far as to say that all members of the house need to "... know their proper place; I in the higher, you the lower," implying it is a hierarchy that predates him.

The pattern continues when Heathcliff later returns and escalates Hindley's same rhetoric, engendering a feeling that the suffering of the Heights and heath are more of a cathartic quality of their lives than of their violent choices. While that interpretation has great merit in other ways, like the *Wyler* category it leaves out much of the critique of gender. Cathy is portrayed as a non-agentic plot device due to her actions being the result of overwhelming mental decline. Further, in the final scene when Heathcliff is shot, Isabella's involvement in Heathcliff's murder is under Hindley's influence – it is unknown who pulled the trigger, but it

was Hindley's idea and pressure that motivated the shooting either way. The feminine as only agentic according to masculine constraints is not criticized, but reinforced.

For all Sasdy's changes, it is only three years later that the Fuest 1970 film uses Timothy Dalton to push changes to their most extreme. Representing a third category which makes the most extreme changes, it is also here that dependence on the source is the least to be seen. Like Sasdy, the film explicitly states Heathcliff is a "lascar;" Mr. Earnshaw admits Heathcliff is his bastard; and the romance plot unspools, shifting out of the romance genre, when Cathy begs Heathcliff to simply take her away. Heathcliff loses all antiheroic sympathy when he rejects her in favor of first getting revenge – resulting in her death and villainizing himself entirely. The critiques made using Heathcliff in other iterations are totally absent here. After the point of denying Cathy's offer, the story departs mostly into its own inventions.

Unlike Sasdy, the influence of surroundings and upbringing is effectively presented as a moral good, with Heathcliff's lack of belonging being the real tragedy – which Cathy abets by failing to fulfill her role as a marriageable daughter, hence influencing him to return. In the novel, Heathcliff's villain role is mediated throughout by its dual capacity as antihero, challenging the reader's process of interpretation against their conditioned expectations as to what it means to be a villain. In the film, the aesthetic of a strong villain is less complicated by sympathy and more by the lack of a strong hero to counter him.

The *Heights* adaptations fit into two categories that diverge around the antihero: The first category, the romance trend, focuses on the first half of the novel and strays from the

antiheroism of Heathcliff's character,<sup>14</sup> either intentionally or coincidentally; the second category, more concerned with shocking violence and conflict, opens greater opportunity to tap into Brontë's psychological realism by reorganizing or condensing selective content to suit the medium. Across both categories, a stable change is consistent; either Heathcliff's antiheroism is reduced out of the text, or the radical ideas expressed are omitted. In sum, adaptation onto screen causes either change to, or absence of, content for the surface reasoning of industry and medium demands. In certain adaptations, like *Fuest*, there is no dependence on reputation nor "truthful" change attempted. There is ample evidence that the deradicalization effect goes further in such instances; rather than merely removing critique, it reinforces the thing being critiqued. It is not necessary to dwell on whether such reinforcement is intentional or merely a byproduct of the changes, because the point is that such reinforcement exists. Preserving the aesthetic of violence and dark passion, but removing the themes that aesthetic connected, can create new connections to other themes – such as in *Fuest*'s representation of Cathy's death seemingly as a consequence of her infidelity to her husband, rather than as the victim of destructive gender norms.

To go further into *Fuest*, the best example to illustrate the problem of reinforcing what the novel critiqued is in *Fuest*'s conclusion. Leading up to the final act, if the film had used different names and settings, the story may have been able to stand entirely separate from *Heights*, as it is so different that the end is a new creation. After rejecting Cathy's invitation to elope in favor

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<sup>14</sup> In this sense, 'antihero' is being used in two ways. First, the specific usage I have developed holds up here – the antihero as identifiable by the three traits of violence, sympathy, and radicalism. The second way is the less specific, undefined way that a general audience identifies an antihero – whether by intuition, incapability of calling them a hero, because they are hero nor villain, or some other means. In either case, the adaptations of this first category tend to stray from the simultaneously the monstrous and sympathetic characterization in the novel and, instead, Heathcliff is sympathetic and later monstrous, slowly deteriorating sympathy for him.

of revenge, Heathcliff follows the novel in using marriage to Isabella to try to ruin Edgar. In response, Cathy's psychological breakdown from the novel is recontextualized as either actual mental disability or as revenge itself, possibly both.<sup>15</sup> After her death, the film concludes with Edgar at her funeral, Heathcliff on his horse in the distance, and the two locking eyes from afar; Heathcliff rides away, defeated. Despite Cathy's tragedy, the system has been arranged as it was before Heathcliff ever arrived, effectively restoring a balance that Cathy is ultimately to blame for disrupting – a balance which is represented as a moral good.

Broadly speaking, the bulk of *Heights* adaptations fit into the three categories, sometimes with overlap into each. These three categories and the ways in which they mitigate the novel's radical aspects show that the force of adaptation does not only omit the radical – the radical is rejected. Perhaps it is too much to ask for direct adaptation to factor meaningful or stable expression of genuinely radical content. Hence the need to jump typical barriers of medium and genre to illustrate the intertextually re-emergent functions of radical ideas across time. Within the constraints of a publishing process that is quite clearly an ideological apparatus of liberalism, direct adaptation cannot reasonably be anticipated to reproduce anti-liberal content. Indirect adaptation, it may be called, is shown in modern works to be much more capable in restructuring medium around radical ideas.

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<sup>15</sup> The 1992 Kosminsky film uses a similar technique where it is uncertain, but implied that Cathy has a real mental decline – but that her choices led to it. The result of those choices and decline is that Edgar allows Dr. Kenneth to perform surgery on a part of her brain, representing an extreme medical practice of the Victorian period and of the husband role as violently in control over his spouse.

### Section III: Adaptation Barriers & Contemporary Media Antiheroism

Vince Gilligan's *Breaking Bad* is a significant shift from the Victorian novel and period adaptation, but the connection between these diverse media may be surprising. To illustrate the deradicalization effect in adaptation, it is necessary for me to demonstrate how critique endures beyond the source text – and how re-emergence of specific conventions factors into the process. Most commonly dubbed a crime drama, AMC's series has also been compared to the western and black comedy, and debate over the series as a neo-western has updated the definition of neo-westerns. In a similar sense, the neo-Victorian genre's boundaries could also be challenged from a perspective more concerned with messaging, theme, and function over that of aesthetic and style. Most importantly, I will interpret *Breaking Bad* according to the same definitional observations about antiheroes that I took from *Heights*.

In a few sentences, *Breaking Bad* can be summarized according to the Victorian body of story conventions. In fact, it has a strikingly far greater success than some Neo-Victorian works in reproducing some of the strongest non-aesthetic conventions core to the period, such as the effects of feminine psychological trauma and the power of confession. Other series and films could be made to sound like a Victorian novel – except in the sense of patterns like those found in *Breaking Bad*, which make it exceptionally Victorian in several senses. Like Dames' conception of the novel in non-idealistic terms, Jason Mittell identifies the modern television serial as containing a "narrative complexity" separate from that of the novel: "[O]ver the past two decades, a new model of storytelling has emerged as an alternative to the conventional episodic and serial forms that have typified most American television." (17). While Mittell

suggests that 'complex TV' is therefore independent of previous TV, film, and novels,<sup>16</sup> the more interesting sub-argument to the existence of complex TV (outside of whether it is independent) is how it uses re-emergent narrative patterns and themes from other mediums. Antiheroes from series like *The Wire*, *Mad Men*, *The Shield*, and *Breaking Bad* resonate both in their genres and in Bordwell's narrational mode (the internalized use of elements across modal barriers). *Breaking Bad*'s mode is distinctly Victorian-esque in terms of how it adapts psychological realism, melodrama, and an antihero especially similar to the Victorian antihero.

To summarize with specifics before interpreting the characters, Walter White is an unassuming chemistry teacher. He is a simplified superfluous man; incredibly skilled but one who has somehow lost his aim in life; the audience is introduced to his feelings of failure at their height, but do not know how the feelings began. He teaches high school and works at a car wash while his wife, Skyler, sells knick-knacks online. Their son, Walter, Jr., is paraplegic, and Skyler is pregnant. The uneasy balance of not-quite-failure is disrupted by the plot hook of the series: Walt is diagnosed with terminal cancer, a condition which his insurance will not cover. Rather than tell his family this news, Walt goes on a ride-along with his brother-in-law, Hank Schrader – a Drug Enforcement Agent – to a meth lab bust. Walt sees his former student and co-protagonist, Jesse Pinkman, escape the lab – and blackmails Jesse into a partnership to cook and distribute meth using Walt's genius-level chemistry skill.

Introducing the series in such terms is perhaps counterintuitive to my aims of comparing the show to the Victorian. However, a strong starting example of its exceptional Victorian-ness

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<sup>16</sup> With some scholarly debate on the subject, such as William Bartley's 2021 contention in "What is Long-Form Television?" that, while complex TV does exist, it is impossible without its interdependency of comparison to prior mediums.

is in Walter initially being easily taken advantage of. He is constantly floundering, such as in his constant failure to have stable interactions with his wife and child, until he overcomes his failure to understand how the deployment of confession and omission impacts himself and others. The gendered hierarchy of the family that is implied by Walt's failures parallel his failure as a member of liberal capitalism, explored via confession. This pattern of gendered hierarchies serves as the entrypoint into the discussion of *Breaking Bad's* representation of the antihero.

### *Gender Dual-Hierarchy in Breaking Bad*

Walt's character changes rapidly into a dangerous criminal seeking not just finance for his family, but wealth and power for himself. The gender dynamics of Walter's libidinal pursuit of not only wealth and ownership over others, but also of power track quite closely to Heathcliff's trajectory. The traumas of Jesse and Skyler, in their dual-roles as feminine obstacles to Walt as well as material necessities for his motivation, are textbook examples of the Victorian novel's psychological realism in all but period. In *Wuthering Heights*, the structure of roles is fairly straightforward; it is the change over time and the duality with which certain characters can occupy roles that complicates the story. The Earnshaw family begins with a patriarchal landowner, his wife, servants, and children. Each layer is broken into dualities: The most important of these dualities is found in the children's status as both innocent and terribly cruel, whose development runs along that strata into adulthood. As they grow, the qualitative differences of gender, as defined by society, shape their relationships. The second part of the story involves the breakdown of the first hierarchy: the death of Mr. Earnshaw; his replacement by Hindley, pushing Heathcliff down the social ladder; and the threat of the Lintons as they befriend Cathy. The changes set a pattern up to the end of the novel, when Cathy the younger

and Hareton are freed from Heathcliff, in a way that mirrors a similar pattern of change in *Breaking Bad*.

The surface example of gendered roles in the series begins with Walter and Skyler. The feminine world is the primary threat to Walter's hidden world, where masculinity defines all relationships as transactional, brokered upon the capacity for violence. The overlap in the two worlds increases the more he is pulled into the world of crime – especially by his own libidinal drive to extract wealth from illicit sources, expropriating them for his family's ostensible benefit. It is obvious early on, when Walter first forces Jesse to contact former drug-dealing associates, that Walter and Jesse's profit potential is directly proportional to the increase in risk to which they expose their loved ones. Walter's antiheroic traits in his criminal arc are far more difficult to identify with than his cancer, failed career, and family life, where sympathy is generated. The further the series continues, his sympathetic excuses for criminality are either delayed or resolved. However, by that point an illicit sympathy for his criminal activity has been engendered as he and Jesse overcome threats and challenges using extraordinary and comedic means. Despite the delay and resolution, the divisions between Walter's two lives widen and create a duality of roles that progressively oppose each other. Walter is at first just as much at the mercy of liberal complexity as any of the other characters.

*Breaking Bad* follows a similar structure as *Heights* in an easily reproduceable schema. An obvious example of the structure early on is in the constant comparison of toxic masculinity between Walter and Hank Schrader, Skyler's brother and a DEA agent. Whereas Walter conveys a toxic weakness and struggle against the mundane, Hank is effectively a hero of the western genre – his bravado and general toughness defining his outward-facing character, with

tenderness and uncertainty beneath. Skyler has two roles as both the motivation and threat to Walter's drug operation (similar to Heathcliff being motivated by love for and threatened by the independence of Cathy). Skyler's feminine role is defined by its capacity for being the symbolic and literal material, like property, that Walter seeks to protect.

The first season also begins an unorthodox relationship, for television crime dramas at least, in which the other feminine role is occupied by a male figure, Jesse. Like Skyler's relation to material commodification, Jesse is in a labor role where his 'apprenticeship' to Walter becomes increasingly subservient and protected.<sup>17</sup> A great deal of Walter's sympathetic antiheroism comes from the ever-greater lengths he will go to protect Jesse, such as when rival drug dealers use a child to sell drugs and, when the child is no longer useful, kill him: Jesse progressively dwindles into a rage and confronts the rival dealers, who will certainly kill him – until Walter suddenly intervenes, killing the rivals. Walter did so even after dismissing and berating Jesse, establishing that Walter's identity is dependent on Jesse. That protectionist sympathy emerges as a strong indicator of Walter's early villain status, when he secretly lets Jesse's girlfriend, Jane, die from drug-induced asphyxiation rather than save her life. Jane's murder establishes a noble lie that Walter uses as power over Jesse for the rest of the series, thus eroding the audience's sympathy for Walter and shifting it more strongly to Jesse and others.

*Heights* develops along the conflict of Heathcliff's mastering the system and elevating himself within it by using violence against it. *Breaking Bad* develops along Walter encountering greater masculine forces than himself and replacing them. The more power he acquires, the

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<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that the masculinity/femininity dynamics here are the implied use of the roles as constructions of liberal systems; no positive value judgment is meant to be implied in their usage.

character of "Walter White" splits between Walt and the Heisenberg drug-lord persona, the latter undertaking conquests that lay waste to the criminal underground – but wear down his family relationships with each successive criminal victory. The balancing act fails when Skyler outright confesses to Walter that she knows, stating "You're a drug dealer" (season 3, episode 1).

Walter constantly tries to expand his operation for the sake of his family while his actions continue to convey a greater interest in a libidinal, imperial monument to himself. Skyler and Jesse are played against the Walter/Heisenberg duality as the seasons progress toward the total takeover by Heisenberg as the primary antagonist. Walt's antiheroic sympathy is shifted to Jesse and Skyler. Sympathy for Skyler from the audience, as well as her using Walter's abuse against him, is found in the episode "Fifty-One" (season 5, episode 4): Skyler has removed their two children from the home after Walt has moved back in without her consent, sending their children to live with Hank and Marie until further notice. Skyler has been operating in the vague space of psychological breakdown. In a complementary reversal of Walt's masterminding and manipulation, Skyler is instead antiheroic in that she takes her best available options until she can ultimately wait Walt out – "for the cancer to come back." While the same three antihero traits are expressed in radically different ways, Skyler's use of the traits is still generally true to the relationship that antiheroes have to the social system in which they live. Unlike *Heights* adaptations, Skyler's feminine role accesses antiheroism without being reduced to a mere object of the plot or as a reinforcement of liberal gender roles.

*Breaking Bad's* implied ideological assumption is that the world operates on a combination of knowledge and confession, with forces competing at the top of the hierarchy that include

law enforcement and Mexican cartels – but that their competition is born of existential co-dependence. The system depends on violence between opposed groups. Law enforcement like the DEA can only act on certain knowledge, with the cartel enforcing its network by an honor system dependent on a refusal to confess anything – even inconsequential information. Walter and Hank's relationship matches the same co-dependent patterns, but on the level of psychological detail. Within these two opposite forces, a reconstitution of society is made by the series where, rather than two layers of society with the urban center protected from the criminal element, they are increasingly imagined as the same. By comparing the patterns across broad societal conflict and the implicit inequity of marriage, *Breaking Bad* can transmit radical ideas that rarely find expression on screen.

*Radical Content of Breaking Bad: Analyzing Skyler White & White Supremacy*

Scholarship on *Breaking Bad* has often addressed the problem that Skyler presents for the interpretation of the series. For example, in Paul Herskovitz's "Textual Analysis of Skyler White," the interpretation of her character depends so much on Walt's agency that her status as sympathetic or villainous is left too much up to the audience – an audience which Herskovitz identifies as increasingly toxic itself not just in its desire to see Walt's unlawful triumphs, but also in participating in the empowerment of his masculine identity.

The show's indirect response to a major segment of the audience, a segment which identifies with Walter's toxic masculinity, was to adapt itself to this audience with a counter-narrative of Walter's motivation. The writers became activist in part to reject that audience's misinterpretation, but also to correct or reject parts of the audience. Walter's motivation is identified as purely selfish and destructive in his final words to Skyler in the final episode:

"Felina," when Walter states, "I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it and I was really... I was alive" (season 5, episode 16).

The claim creates a powerful closure for the audience's sympathy – except insofar as Skyler is involved. She is totally incapable of preventing Walter from re-entering her life; blaming herself for Hank's death; incapable of turning Walter over to the authorities; and having already that physical violence would be met with endangerment to her children. The constraints of the liberal order, for both *Breaking Bad* and *Heights*, reduce femininity to a dilemma where the feminine figure must compromise themselves or the safety of others, especially their children or lovers. The scene goes to some length to make certain that Skyler is not an antagonistic force, but by doing so Walt almost totally removes Skyler's agency in her final scenes. Still, by the end of the series, the melodramatic and somewhat heavy-handed episodes illustrate a structure that depends on violence as much as the duality between the Heights and the Grange – and, again like *Heights*, how that structure can be radically destabilized.

*Breaking Bad* illustrates exactly how this destabilization functions in a way that is still shocking for its genre, or really any popular television genre, in that the series connects the liberal system to a last resort against threats: White supremacy as the disconcertingly direct link to liberal power as the reason why Walter is so difficult to outmaneuver. In the final two seasons, the connection between Walter and power grows explicit with the introduction of a group represented largely by Todd Alquist, a mild-mannered and smiling neo-Nazi. The gang takes an increasingly prevalent role in the background of season 4. Their presence shows a disturbing, radical existential connection between white supremacy, law enforcement, capitalist violence, and toxic heteronormative masculinity.

The liberal system is thrown off balance when the characters are challenged by the underlying violence around them, a violence inherent to the system. Response to challenges informs the audience as to what ideology each character represents and how those ideological leanings connect based on the relationships between characters. When Jesse ultimately leaves Walt to help Hank, the resulting crisis of masculinity as Jesse crosses the gendered boundary devastates the social order of the entire series: Jesse disrupts the norms of law, Walter's power, and his own life for years. When Walter carried Jesse to success in the liberal order, he also empowered Jesse's ability to finally confess to Hank regarding Walter's activities. The seizing act of power is so strong that it causes the destabilization of the liberal system beyond just the order and its members – it forces Walter to recognize himself as the villain because, as he tries to confront Jesse, the result is Hank's death.

In the final episodes, the audience is forced to confront Walter's monstrous nature. The result is a recontextualizing of him as both a more complex antihero and a less sophisticated villain, as well as what it means to have sympathized and identified with such an antiheroic character to begin with – and what the society such an antihero critiques looks like. The radical ideas that come through in Skyler and Jesse are not given adequate closure,<sup>18</sup> possibly due to the amount of focus given to the intense and prolonged struggle between Walter and Hank. However, in that struggle with Hank, the radical equivocation of societal forces as existentially dependent on the violence – law enforcement and criminal activity; capitalist pursuit and white supremacy – again matches quite closely with the liberal critique in *Heights*. Antiheroes in both works have strong relationships to that violence dependency, elucidating a possible area of

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<sup>18</sup> With a sequel film, *El Camino*, released to expand what happened to Jesse past Walt's death.

antihero study that could yield much more evidence in interrogating the definition of the antihero.

## *Conclusion*

Though Walter White and Heathcliff were chosen for their controversial differences in period, setting, and genre, my working model is applicable across many other genres and examples. The purpose of starting with radically disparate examples was to intentionally challenge the assumptions of antihero definitions, as well as to highlight the importance that certain traits of antiheroes have in general application – traits which otherwise may not stand out as well in the vacuum of a single period or genre. By showing that strong evidence for exploring the antihero can be derived from disparate sources, the research I have conducted serves as evidence for the three traits I have succeeded in identifying and defending as common across the character type. The primary takeaway I hope to have accomplished is that sympathy, violence, and radicalism are foundational to the antihero – and, ultimately, that further investigation into these traits is a fruitful area of further research into both the antihero and into real systemic issues that literature can address.

As shown in the intertextual comparison of the two works, defining the antihero is a difficult task and the process is further complicated by the diverse (and sometimes contradictory) examples across mediums. Hence, as stated from the beginning, the goal was never to create a definitive, generalizable terminology that would fit all antiheroes. The process of identifying specific moments in the history of using antiheroes, however, does provide a way of synthesizing the common traits that are used in specific mediums. The similarities in the radical capacity of antiheroes allow me to make two distinctions. First, their radical relationship is not only to the fictional, but also to the real world; no character that is widely identifiable as an antihero lacks that description. Second, the relationship is genuinely radical, because it

represents ideas that counter the system's interests – especially inequitable and unjust systems of power – in ways that can mobilize further systemic critique.

The continuation of the antihero's critiques is the last test that a definition would need to survive. Antiheroes prove resilient across the barriers of time, place, and perspective. Despite the evident pattern of deradicalization of antiheroes across generations, new uses of the character type, like Walter White, still innovatively maintain their place in radical discourse. The elevation of *Wuthering Heights* to literary canon took decades and indicates that the antihero's meaning is also connected to each audience's interaction with the source and with subsequent iterations of the convention – a connection I have strongly identified across adaptation, deradicalization, and intertextual re-emergence.

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