



AALBORG UNIVERSITET

# The Crisis in Masculinity

## Neoliberalism and Masculinity in Breaking Bad

June 2020

MA Thesis

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*Illustration by Sébastien Thibault  
(The Guardian, 2018)*

## Abstract

Ever since the Second World War men began to see a decline in their patriarchal roles from the societal shift such as equal rights and the role of women in the workplace. One of the problematic results of this is the increasing rates of suicide in males as a warning signal of a deep cultural problem in contemporary Western society. Males lack a script to deal with the masculinity crisis that they are currently experiencing. Through examples of popular culture, the portrayal of men struggling to find new ways to regain lost masculinity is examined from a neoliberal perspective exhibited in the TV-series *Breaking Bad* and the Marvel Cinematic Universe *Deadpool* films. These texts provoke a neoliberal reconstruction of masculinity that enforces the patriarchal hierarchy for men to regain a sense of purpose. However, this neoliberal reconstruction also persuades men to abandon a set of familial ideals that include positive and feminine attributes and replace it with hegemonic and violent tendencies. Through the analysis of *Breaking Bad* and *Deadpool*, it becomes apparent that modern television offers a unique insight into how contemporary culture deals with the crisis in masculinity and it also offers a critique of the same value system that it promotes. The crisis is seen through the extremes that men are willing to go to in order to portray themselves as being a capable patriarch. *Breaking Bad* exemplifies the domination and violence needed to reach the top of the male hierarchy through the emasculated Walter White who overtakes the illegal drug industry. The crisis is further shown through a meta-analysis of the *Deadpool* movies, and how deeply connected the actor is with the character. Wade Wilson from *Deadpool* enforces the same traditional ideals of masculinity as Walter does, however from the other end of the spectrum. While Walter White is trying to establish himself as a dominating patriarch, Wade Wilson is able to embody more feminine traits due to his interrelation with the highly masculine actor, Ryan Reynolds. While the *Deadpool* films attempt to patronise the traditional masculine traits, it is also founded in the same patriarchal ideals. Thereby stating that men has to establish themselves through a traditional hierarchy before they can adopt positive attributes. The TV-show and films thus present a script for men in which they must embody the contradictory ideals of masculinity in order to regain a sense of purpose in society. Therefore, the thesis proves itself relevant, as it highlights the devastating effects of the toxic traits of masculinity, where being a neoliberal winner overshadows the familial values.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	1
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	4
Methodology .....	5
Existing Research .....	7
The Antihero Genre .....	7
Breaking Bad .....	9
Chapter 2: Neoliberalism .....	10
Introducing Neoliberalism .....	10
Neoliberalism in <i>Breaking Bad</i> .....	12
The Dichotomy of Walter White and Gustavo Fring .....	17
Winning or Losing Neoliberalism .....	20
Chapter 3: Masculinity and Hegemony .....	23
The Emasculated Walter White .....	27
Embracing Violence .....	35
Being a Provider, Father, and Husband .....	39
Being a Provider .....	40
Being a Father .....	42
Walter and Jesse .....	44
The Nuclear Father .....	48
It Can't All Be For Nothing .....	50
The Real Father Figure of Breaking Bad .....	51
The Nuances of the Crisis in Masculinity .....	55
Chapter 4: The Cultural Influence of Films and TV-Series .....	58
Chapter 5: Conclusion .....	61
References .....	64
Appendix A – Suicide Death Rates in Females .....	70
Appendix B – Suicide Death Rates in Males .....	70
Appendix C – Suicide in Males and Females by Region .....	71

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The popular clothing company, Dockers, released a campaign called “Wear the Pants” in 2009. One of the images used in the campaign is the silhouette of a male figure wearing a pair of Dockers with

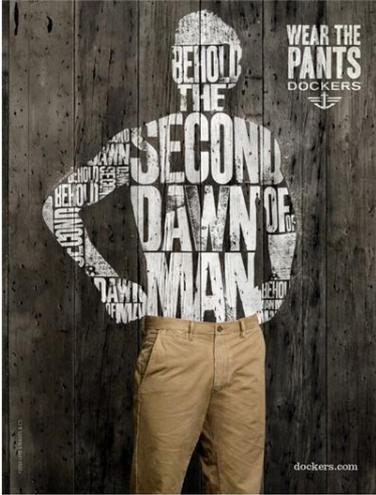


Figure 1 (Lavelle, Desmond, 2009)

a message across the torso (Figure 1). The message states: “Behold the Second Dawn of Man” (LaVelle, Desmond, 2009). The campaign suggests that men are supposed to wear the pants, that men have somehow lost their place as the provider, and that patriarchy has been violated. This provokes two questions: Why did men stop wearing the pants? And who wore the pants in their place? The Dockers company do have an interesting point that is also apparent in modern television. Neoliberal ideals are used to reconstruct masculinity which enforces the toxic traits associated with traditional patriarchal masculinity. Male role models are challenged in contemporary popular television as they reflect the crisis that is

apparent in masculinity. There has been a fundamental change in the legitimate expectations, motivations, and justifications that inform the representation of masculinity in late-twentieth-century Hollywood cinema (Harman, 2013). Patriarchal masculinity depends on the subjugation of women, yet women do not want to be objectified anymore and white women even started working outside the house. Thus, masculinity found itself in a crisis where men are unable to figure out how to construct masculinity. Instead of the classic hypermasculine characters such as Superman or Captain American, who never had their masculinity questioned as they are superhuman ideals of what it means to be a man, television is now filled with men incapable of finding meaning with their existence and resorting to either nihilism or neoliberalism to regain a position of power. According to the American Psychological Association, cultural changes appear to affect men in uniquely troubling ways. William Liu, PhD and professor at the University of Iowa states that: “Society is changing, but we don’t talk to white men and ask them what they are struggling with. There’s a tendency to minimize it, yet the distress and disconnection are very real” (Weir, 2017). Men feel that their masculinity ideology is under attack because it was built on a set of gender norms that endorse specific features, yet the societal shifts such as the role of women in the workplace or the acceptance of same-sex relationships increases the rates of mental health problems in males who conform to traditional masculine norms (Weir, 2017). Suicide statistics from the

World Health Organisation (WHO) also illustrate that men are much more likely to commit suicide than females as can be seen in the charts in Appendix A, B, and C (GHO, 2017).

With that in mind, the TV-series, *Breaking Bad*, and Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) films, *Deadpool*, are warning rockets of the problem in white heterosexual masculinity and neoliberal policies. Walter White, the protagonist from *Breaking Bad*, personifies the core principle of economic and political existence in early-21<sup>st</sup> century America. Neoliberalism, whether it is at the corporate, governmental, or individual level has spread through American societies in a forty-year span resulting in tendency toward privatisation, and *Breaking Bad* explores the neoliberal policies in crucial points such as gender roles, crime prevention, and contemporary business. *Breaking Bad* confronts neoliberalism as a capitalist catastrophe that penetrates every aspect of modern masculinity and portrays the failed economic initiatives, governmental policies, and individual entrepreneurship which culminate in a monopolisation of financial gain for a small portion of society while dismissing the rest (Lee, 2016). The neoliberal ideology also serves for a damaging way for men to reconstruct masculinity.

This thesis presents evidence of a transformation in the legitimate ways of acting for white heterosexual men in contemporary Western society and examine how this transformation is tied to a rising dominance of a neoliberal narrative and the masculine crisis that is present. Thus, we aim to demonstrate how certain anti-heroic characters found in popular culture serve as a representation of the crisis in masculinity and examine how these characters attempt to reconstruct or regain lost masculinity. To answer this thesis, Walter White from *Breaking Bad* and Wade Wilson from *Deadpool* are used as examples of instances that address the crisis in masculinity and resort to neoliberalism to reconstruct masculinity without the subjugation of women and minorities.

## Methodology

*Breaking Bad* has reached its narrative end with the last episode airing on September 29, 2013 and the *Deadpool* films aired in 2016 and 2018, which gives us the opportunity to focus on the development of the characters from the beginning to the end. For that reason, this thesis can focus on the issues of masculinity and neoliberalism and how these two concepts are materialised in the TV-series and MCU movies as well as how these texts frame the dialectic relationship between masculinity and neoliberalism.

We approach contemporary media and its representation of masculinity and neoliberalism as in a state of constant flux. Representations of masculinity and neoliberalism are constantly changing

as they are dependent on the cultural values and policies of contemporary society and politics and it is thus important to acknowledge that the two concepts are developing. We simply analyse the two texts from the basis of the contemporary contexts in which they are inscribed. Because of this, this project may not be correct if the materiality, or the ascribed values, of the social practices in question are not recognised by the reader. When analysing the semiotics of TV-series and movies, the understood purpose will differ depending on the individual and their cultural, as well as, political values. Thus, we cannot argue that this paper is absolute or the only correct interpretation of the social structures at play. A semiotic analysis of any cultural text cannot achieve this level of objectivity, as different readers will bring different orientations of interpretation to the texts.

The reason for studying the representation of white heterosexual masculinity comes from a concern not only to address specific popular Hollywood representations that firmly place normative humanity in the figure of the white male hero, but also to trace the transformation in the normative role that this figure performs. The aim is thus to intervene in the discourses surrounding the study of masculinity and provide a new means of theorising to account for why there has been such a concern with the problem of masculinity since the 1970s. Many men are confused about what modern manhood is about, and many men do not do well with confusion (Zalis, 2019). While harmful stereotypes of masculinity do exist, focusing on power dynamics, domination of other men, subjugation of women, violence, and greed, there has been a modern surge calling for men to break free from those toxic chains and be better. This surge is presented in various cultural texts, including Gillette's "We Believe: The Best Men Can Be" ad campaign (Gillette, 2019). Gary Barker, the President and CEO of the non-governmental organisation Promundo that promotes caring, non-violent, and equitable masculinities and gender relations, states that:

"It is time to talk about the kinds of men we want our sons to become. For our daughters, we have promised a new world. We are still about 200 years off from full equality at the current rate of change according to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap report, but we are making some progress. We have written new scripts for our daughters about strength and leadership, but we have not written scripts for our sons in this new world." (Zalis, 2019).

Masculinity is directly related to the societal position of women and minority groups, and when those groups gained new opportunities in a post-modern world, masculinity lost the option of relying on them and thus had to turn to different aspects to reshape masculinity. We hypothesise that neoliberalism has become the contemporary way for masculinity to be expressed and reconstructed, as neoliberalism offers the individual a form of personal freedom through

entrepreneurship and self-empowerment that assist in regaining power and control from a societal point of view. From the crisis, masculinity is thus renouncing the subjugation of women, albeit not entirely. We still expect patriarchal masculinity to rely on the subjugation of women and minorities as it has been the default factor of masculinity for many centuries, but we hope to reveal that masculinity is slowly finding new social situations in which it can be reproduced. Although we apply insights drawn from the sociological aspect of masculinity, this thesis foregrounds male representation in contemporary male-focused television dramas and movies, and the focus will be on the representation of masculinity in a crisis. This transformation of masculinity highlights the toxic traits for both the individual and society as it urges men to separate themselves from familial values and focus on self-empowerment and entrepreneurship. The depiction of neoliberal values we present through *Breaking Bad* and *Deadpool* are extremities in which neoliberalism shatters our traditional understanding of the world and substitutes core values of humanity with selfish and competitive beliefs to achieve the climax of entrepreneurship and personal performance.

In order to examine this, the analysis is split into three chapters; focusing on the neoliberal values and policies that are present in contemporary television, the crisis of masculinity and how it is framed in modern television, and the cultural influence of television and films. To answer the thesis: “How do certain anti-heroic characters found in popular culture serve as a representation of the crisis in masculinity and how do they reconstruct or regain lost masculinity?” we rely on aspects from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how masculinity operates within the discourse present in modern television through different visual communication and compare our findings to other scholars’ research (Pierson, 2013; Faucette, 2013; Podnieks, 2016; Wille, 2014; Lee, 2016; Johnston, 2015).

### Existing Research

In order to avoid repeating existing research and instead add to the discourse of masculinity and the antihero genre, this section explores the research of the antihero genre and *Breaking Bad* to gain an understanding of the themes and expand on the discourses that have already been analysed.

### The Antihero Genre

The antihero genre has been examined closely in relation to morality and popularity by Margrethe Vaage (2016). She examined the reason behind the popularity of the antihero genre as well as the attraction of the antihero’s immorality. She states that various narrative strategies are required to facilitate sympathy with the antihero. These narrative strategies include a long duration of television series which capture on the effects of partiality, the use of long-term alignment with the antihero to

plead for excuses on his behalf, and suspenseful sequences that undermine a rational evaluation of the antihero (Vaage, 2016). She also raises the issue of the popularity of antiheroes compared to heroes. She states: “(...) there must be some pay-off to be found in his very immorality. If there is no attraction to be found in the antihero being immoral, why not just tell stories about conventional heroes? Why an *antihero* in the first place?” (Vaage, 2016; 90). Vaage (2016) found that the attraction in antiheroes stems from the pleasures offered by an antihero’s immorality. Feelings of power are pleasurable because they put the spectator in the position of a winner, and the feelings that are triggered by seeing justice be done are rewarding, regardless of the punishment being more severe than what is condoned in real life. Furthermore, the amoral fascination is also increased by the spectator’s appeal to watch an antihero’s ability to live a life beyond accepted social structure and expectations (Vaage, 2016).

Peters (2016) also argues that the audience is drawn to antiheroes because they are not necessarily superhuman and do not have entirely virtuous qualities. The audience is interested in the antihero because of the flaws, the rebellious nature, and the immoral undertones they possess, which makes them more captivating and easier to relate to (Peters, 2016). It is important to consider the antihero’s morality as dynamic or unstable and it would be incorrect to say that antihero series have neither a moral resolution nor a moral centre. The antihero does have a moral centre as the antihero is perceived as morally preferable to other characters in the story, but the spectator is also regularly encouraged to take a step back and reflect critically on their own engagement. The intuitive morality that the spectator is allowed to rely on in order to see the antihero as the moral centre breaks radically with what would be considered morally right in real life (Vaage, 2016). As a result, antihero TV-series can make the spectator question their own engagements through reality checks, and during these checks, the antihero series changes from a sympathetic narrative to a distanced and ambiguous one in which no one sympathises with anyone. A common moral limitation used in the antihero genre is family. The antihero will show no morality associated with strangers but will be connected deeply in terms of morality to their family. This is a result of the individual or self-centred focus on the antihero in which they disregard any person or situation that does not serve their own selfish purpose except for family. However, examples of the protagonist disregarding family to serve their own selfish purpose is found in the *Deadpool* movies or the *Breaking Bad* TV-series, yet it is framed to support a reflection in the viewer where family becomes a tool to measure how goals and ideal change within the characters.

## Breaking Bad

Various scholars have examined *Breaking Bad* in relation to masculinity and neoliberal policies already. Heng-Patton (2015) examined the narrative of masculinised neoliberalism to reveal how the TV-series revives traditional, male-centric gender roles and how it commodifies the nuclear family (Heng-Patton, 2015). This paper found that self-actualisation of the patriarch and the oppression of other members were the ultimate result of the narrative found in *Breaking Bad*. In other words, the masculine narrative in the TV-series is designed to keep the appearance or the idea of the patriarchal nuclear family intact at the cost of other, marginalised groups. *Breaking Bad* propagated that women were leaving the workplace in order to make room for men following the recession of 2008, which conflated with the idea that men had lost their sense of essential and traditional masculinity. Post-recessionary culture thus called upon men to regain their jobs and identities as the primary provider through the neoliberal capitalism and the belief in self-empowerment of the individual (Heng-Patton, 2015).

Lee (2016) examines the cultural dynamics of television as a quintessential medium of popular culture and the critique of neoliberalism as the most insidious economic policy of early-21<sup>st</sup> century America (Lee, 2016). According to this paper, *Breaking Bad* offers an insight into why neoliberalism is ineffective and destructive in the domains it claims to be most effective. These domains include privatisation, fiscal austerity, deregulation, free trade, and the dismantling of the welfare state in order to enhance the role of the private sector. Walter White embodies the neoliberal fantasy of an individual achieving his full potential; however, the TV-series confronts the viewer with the fantasy leading to the ultimate downfall of Walter White. Instead of portraying neoliberalism as the idea that the market is the best vehicle for individual success and that a market-driven economic model, buoyed by the privatisation of everything, *Breaking Bad* depicts neoliberalism as a dystopian policy that is deeply unsettling and dehumanising while enriching the few at the expense of the many (Lee, 2016).

Lastly, calling for attention to the lack of masculinity studies on television, Wille (2014) examines the complex construction of masculinity in *Breaking Bad* to investigate the crisis of masculinity and the problem of uniform, white, hetero-normative representation in modern television (Wille, 2014). In this paper, the antihero genre was found to fulfil a significant function for the representation of masculinity as these male characters continually break the rules and question authorities, yet are portrayed as anxious, flawed, and unassertive. The transformation of Walter White from an unassertive father and husband into the masculine drug kingpin challenges the hegemonic masculinity model. *Breaking Bad* is a critique of the limitations and challenges

posed to traditional masculine identities with its representation of men as unstable, complex, and contradictory characters. The paper concludes that Walter White demonstrates the problem with uniformly white, heteronormative representation of masculinity on television as the constant battle between greed, guilt, and good intentions reveals that the expectations and struggles of male characters are more complex than previously acknowledged (Wille, 2014).

## Chapter 2: Neoliberalism

The complexity of masculinity is apparent in the concept of neoliberalism, so this chapter deals with how neoliberalism operates in the TV-series *Breaking Bad*. Neoliberalism is an entrepreneurial and winner-takes-all kind of ideology and has great influence on the protagonists' choices as well as their reasoning for behaving the way that they do. This chapter will argue that the characters and narratives intersect with core neoliberal policies and discourses, and exemplifies several of its detrimental social, cultural, and political effects. The chapter is split into two parts. The first part theorises the concept of neoliberalism and discuss the importance of this ideology in contemporary society. The next part examines the neoliberal discourses and the social, cultural, and political effects through the TV-series *Breaking Bad*.

### Introducing Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is an old term dating back to the 1930's coined by Frederick von Hayek (Springer et al., 2016), but it has been revived in recent years as a way of describing current politics in Western societies, or more precisely, "the range of thought allowed by our politics" (Metcalf, 2017).

Neoliberalism is a modification of the older belief in a free market and minimal state known as classical liberalism. In classic liberalism, merchants simply asked the state to leave them alone – laissez-nous faire. However, neoliberalism recognises that the state must be active in the organisation of a market economy. The conditions allowing for a free market must be won politically, and the state must be reengineered to support the free market on an ongoing basis. Yet, every aspect of democratic politics, from the choices of the voters to the decisions of the politicians must surround the discourse of purely economic analysis (Metcalf, 2017). Neoliberalism thus became a way of reordering social reality, and of rethinking our status as individuals. Especially Western society is now urged to think of themselves as proprietors of their own talents and initiative, and neoliberalism is no longer a simple name for pro-market policies or the compromises with finance capitalism made by failing democratic parties. Modern neoliberalism is the aftermath

of the 2008 financial crisis in which the governmental establishments conceded their authority to the market and the self-serving policies that enriched a global financial elite which enabled a rise in inequality (Springer et al., 2016). Neoliberalism is the premise that has come to regulate all we practice and believe; that competition is the only legitimate organising principle for human activity (Metcalf, 2017). At the centre of neoliberalism's conception of subjectivity is the concept of self-care or the accepted premise that each person is responsible for him or herself, thus encapsulating individuality (Pierson, 2013). Individuals must assume responsibility for their well-being and personal development in a market-driven society. Robert McChesney describes neoliberalism as "free market policies that encourage private enterprise and consumer choice, reward personal responsibility and entrepreneurial initiative, and undermine the dead hand of the incompetent, bureaucratic and parasitic government, that can never do good even if well intended, which it rarely is" (Chomsky & McChesney, 1999; 7). It follows that individuals in a neoliberal society are dependent on themselves to ensure financial stability and well-being, and in a winner-takes-all ethos with a competitive market, it can be an enduring struggle to retain the position of power needed to dominate a market. However, neoliberal policies are more beneficial to organisations or individuals that already possess a higher amount of control and power, thus creating a broader gap between the rich and the poor (Ussia, 2012). When the gap between rich and poor is already bigger than what it used to be, it makes it even harder for impoverished individuals to reach a level of financial stability, which as a result, makes neoliberalism more beneficial to the elitist society than the working-class citizen.

However, a complete acceptance of neoliberalism can never completely happen for two reasons. First, it requires every single member of a given society to agree with the dominant discourse and secondly, social processes have an essential temporality in which they continue to unfold or evolve. Those marginalised by neoliberal reforms are actively engaged in continuous struggles to be heard, which is met with state violence in response (Springer, 2016). As the utopian discourse of neoliberal ideals rubs up against empirical realities such as increased inequality and ongoing poverty, citizens are more likely to express discontent with particular characteristics of neoliberalisation, most obviously the reduction of essential social provisions such as healthcare and education. Citizens who are left outside the values of neoliberalism or who do not fit the description of proper neoliberalism are treated as enemies of the ideology. In other words:

"The relationship between neoliberalism and violence is directly related to the system of rule that neoliberalism constructs, justifies, and defends in advancing its hegemonies of ideology,

of policy and program, of state form, of governmentality, and ultimately of discourse” (Springer, 2016; 16).

This quote exemplifies that the establishment, maintenance, and extension of hierarchical orderings of social relations are re-created, sustained, and intensified in a neoliberal context. Although, people are more willing to stand up for our communities, ourselves, and for marginalised groups when they become more aware of the cruelty and violence of neoliberal policies (Springer, 2016). With that in mind, neoliberalism offers individuals a direction where they can empower and measure themselves through wealth, power, and influence. The hierarchy that neoliberalism presents is similar to the hierarchy found in hegemonic masculinity and neoliberalism may govern individuals to enforce those gender norms subconsciously.

### Neoliberalism in *Breaking Bad*

While neoliberalism can be an abstract and difficult concept to understand, the fictional series; *Breaking Bad* makes it accessible because neoliberalism manifests through its main characters and their intense narrative situations. The criminal meth culture in *Breaking Bad* not only presents opportunities for the protagonist, Walter White, to flex his entrepreneurial muscles, but it also exemplifies the harsh brutalities, risk and benefit calculations, and winner-takes-all ethos best associated with neoliberalism, which is constantly exemplified through Walter’s choice to return to his illegal activities despite his own and his family’s safety. Walter White’s transformation, from a dying, emasculated public school teacher to a self-confident, aggressive drug lord, attests both to the seductive powers and dangers of a neoliberal lifestyle in which competition and dominance is crucial to a person’s position in society (Pierson, 2013).

The TV-series, *Breaking Bad* is shot in and around Albuquerque, New Mexico, which is on the edge of an expanding neoliberal economy along with the rest of the modern southwest. Excluding the state of California, the southwest is a region with low taxes, few labour unions, poor farming conditions, and limited government-supported social programmes. Therefore, it is a place with great disparities between the wealthy and the poor, and working and middle-class Americans must often work multiple jobs to support their families (Pierson, 2013). Walter White works at a carwash and as a public school teacher and is thus a part of a public institution that is derided by neoliberal critics as bureaucratically incompetent, ineffective, and a danger to the capitalist market and democracy. The public school system is less concerned with producing a liberally well-rounded and civic-minded person and more concerned with producing employability and economic

productivity that benefits and enforces productive members of the workforce. Education thus serves an instrumental goal of generating the necessary skills and knowledge for a person to become an economically productive member of society instead of focusing on the personal development and independency of students (Pierson, 2013). To expand on this, the public school system also functions as an instance of neoliberal values because it trains students to view themselves as commodities of the private sector instead of focusing on a personal development that serves no immediate financial gain. Students are constantly instructed to tie their worth to their potential worth in a job, and economic productivity then becomes part of the hierarchy in which they can measure their value. Since men are looking for new ways to reconstruct their masculinity, public schools and the discourse they provoke generate a bridge between economic value and masculine identity, which constitute that men can advance masculine portrayal by increasing their economic productivity. With that in mind, Walter White evolves into an example of neoliberal entrepreneurship as he transitions from an emasculated and civil servant who work for a public institution into a free-thinking criminal who carefully weighs the risks and benefits of his criminal actions and follows the subplot of neoliberalism that nothing else counts but winners.

Previously, classical liberalism viewed the criminal as a social divergent who disregarded social norms and it was believed that crime could be reduced through state intervention as well as the criminal could be rehabilitated to fit back into a normal society through intervention of social institutions such as family or job opportunities (Pierson, 2013). However, neoliberal criminology views crime as a routine event committed by people who make particular choices among multiple choices. Crime is believed to occur anywhere and can never be eliminated as people are always faced with choices in which a criminal act can be the result. On that note, the criminal is not a product of social, genetic, or psychological disorders, but a typical rational-economic person who considers and calculates the risks and rewards of their actions (Pierson, 2013). Proof of this is found in the narrative of the decision by Walter White. When Walter decides to pursue a quick financial gain through the producing of methamphetamine, he is not depicted as a crooked criminal, but rather as a rational individual who is making a financial decision that ensures his family's future when he is no longer around. The TV-drama never portrays Walter White as a product of social, genetic or psychological disorders, but as a rational person who is forced to take matters into his own hands as a result of the system failing him. The audience is quickly instructed to feel compassion with Walter and his living conditions, as they are introduced to a character who is oppressed and spends his life helping young people gain an education instead of pursuing a career

that matches his capabilities in chemical science. Walter is constantly being framed as a man who lost in everything he tried to accomplish and as a passive agent in his life. Also, in the beginning of the show, Walter is being pushed around by the school administration and his boss at the carwash, giving the audience a sense of sympathy with a man who is doing nothing wrong yet is treated as useless and worthless. So, when Walter decides to turn to illegal activities to gain some sort of just financial gain, the audience is compassionate and understands his decision without immediately blaming him. At the centre of neoliberalism's conception of subjectivity is the idea of self-care or self-responsibility, and neoliberal governments function to produce self-governing individuals who must take responsibility for their own well-being and development. As a result of this, labour is not perceived as an abstract commodity purchased on the market, but as a human capital that is tied to the individual worker. In choosing labour, a person is therefore portrayed as an entrepreneur who invests his human capital to produce and income that will fund his interests or activities to ensure a personal pleasure or development. Neoliberalism promotes individuals to view themselves as entrepreneurs in every aspect of their lives and crime is thus just another activity among many to choose from to invest his human capital to produce a financial capital to invest in his or her personal interests (Pierson, 2013). According to Jodi Dean (2008), the criminal in neoliberal societies is the fantasy of unpredictable risk and intolerable loss of the free-market ideology (Dean, 2008). However, Pierson (2013) argues that the criminal is more complicated than that, as "The criminal entrepreneur who builds a criminal empire from the ground up serves as a fantasy figure of American capitalism" (Pierson, 2013; 25). In other words, the audience is sympathetic with the idea that Walter White decides to pursue an illegal career, as the fundamental values of current politics require a person to become entrepreneurs of their own abilities. Walter is simply using his talents and skills to gain a financial benefit and gain power. Not only is Walter exercising the fantasy of American capitalism in a critical manner, but his actions are also justified through the political values that contemporary society has formed as an excuse for his choice. The show frames the situation so that Walter is put in an impossible situation where he must choose between dying without cancer treatment or roll the dice and leave his family impoverished.

When Walter White finds out about his cancer, he decides to use his chemistry knowledge to become a criminal drug producer. In contrast to his low-paying teaching job, Walter is now producing a high quality, potent form of crystal meth that becomes the most sought-after product in the American Southwest and Europe. The illegal drug market and how it operates in *Breaking Bad* has more in common with the concepts of modern capitalism than any other system. The constantly

changing market territories and wealth, the winner-takes-all ethos, and the unwanted government intrusion into the operations represent the brutalities best associated with the global, neoliberal marketplace. In addition to this, the narrative in *Breaking Bad* is closely following the political values of contemporary society. Walter White is always making the decision that fits the core values of a neoliberal marketplace and modern capitalism, which is why Walter, for example, utilises working-class citizens as disposable objects to sell and distribute his product, or why Walter always choose to pursue his career instead of focusing on his family. Furthermore, Walter begins to launder his money to provide the appearance that his money derives from legitimate sources, and while money laundering is an illegal activity, it shares affinities with the rapid monetary exchanges and established tax haven countries that have become common practices of global corporation in neoliberal societies. *Breaking Bad* is thus exemplifying the social structures of reality as the narrative presents Walter's acts accordingly to common practices of bigger corporations in contemporary society. Below the large-scale operators and the drug cartels are the smaller drug dealers and entrepreneurs. The criminal drug market in Albuquerque is stocked with uneducated, poor Latino Americans and white males who are captivated by the quick cash and flashy lifestyle over a low-wage employment. Both of these groups are exploited by the mainstream neoliberal global economy that only offers them low-wage jobs with little opportunities for social advancement, and usually serve a supporting role to the drug operations by functioning as distributors or consumers (Pierson, 2013). In other words, *Breaking Bad* is presenting a narrative that is extremely critical of the working-class American. The TV-drama is actively showing how the elite is exploiting lower social classes through the harsh brutalities of narcotics while drawing similarities to the structures of reality, and Walter is mimicking global corporations to establish himself as a powerful asset. Drawing on that is the reason why neoliberal values can be used in a way to restore a position of power and purpose for men in Western society. From the corporate and capitalistic policies, men and brands are able to gain a high amount of power in terms of wealth, cultural influence, and personal gain.

Walter White's new career provides a new excitement and desire that was missing from his previous stale, middle-class existence. At the car wash in the pilot episode, Walter stands up for himself when his boss demands that he wipes down cars again instead of managing the register and Walter assaults the display racks with air fresheners in an outburst of rage. When Walter and his wife take out their disabled son, Walter Jr., to buy new pants, some guys make fun of Junior. Walter would usually ignore these events and leave without saying anything, burning with internal rage.

Yet, he responds by knocking out the teenagers and stepping on their ankles to incapacitate them. In their home, Walter also overtakes his wife with atypical sexual advancements that seem almost too aggressive and demonstrative shown by the surprised and scared facial expression of his wife, Skyler. Walter's terminal condition and criminal entrepreneurship liberate him from his usual passive self and frees him to express his repressed aggression. While this atypical type of aggressive behaviour can be a metaphor for many things, it also illustrates the position of power that Walter embodies both in his private as well as professional life. The TV-drama thus exemplifies the liberation and satisfaction of pursuing neoliberal policies. Walter is no longer bound by the passive values of a democratic society such as family, friendship, and other junctions that does not benefit your self-empowerment, but he is able to prosecute selfish agendas that benefit his own identity and position in the hierarchy of men and power.

Throughout the series, Walter White states over and over how he is only doing illegal activities to ensure that he can provide for his family even after his death. The reason behind all of his choices and the consequences that he has to face is not in vain as it will ensure that his family can live a comfortable life. However, at the end of the show, Walter admits to himself and his wife that he did not do it for them. His initial incitement to enter the market may have been because of selfless ambition, but in the end, Walter continues to produce and distribute methamphetamine because he likes how powerful it makes him feel. In the episode "Felina" he states: "I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it. And I was really ... I was alive" (Breaking Bad, 2008; "Felina"). The neoliberal ideology only makes room for winners and losers. There is no in-between and to be a winner is not only dependant on the amount of wealth and power you obtain. A neoliberal winner must overcome all competitions and maintain a position of strength on the market that you are expecting to dominate. In Walter White's case, the market he intends to dominate is the illegal drug market in the Southwest of the USA, and to dominate a criminal market of that size, he is forced to eliminate his competition using more extreme methods than what is considered acceptable in a contemporary society and in other competitive markets. While Walter White does seem weak and insecure at first, he quickly adapts to his environment and becomes the biggest shark in the sea. At this point in the show, Walter has completely lost himself on his quest to restore his missing masculinity through the emancipation of neoliberal ideology, but it is also the point in the show where Walter compares his previous values to his current. At this point, Walter realises that his neoliberal conquest assisted him in regaining his masculinity far better than what he previously attempted to do through family values.

At the same time, Skyler fears that Walter is in danger because of his business and how weakly he is usually portrayed to her, however, Walter states: “You clearly don’t know who you’re really talking to, so let me clue you in. I am not in danger, Skyler. I am the danger. A guy opens his door and gets shot, and you think that of me? No! I am the one who knocks” (Breaking Bad, 2008; “Cornered”). This quote illustrates the first time Skyler truly got to see how her husband has evolved and what he really has become. Skyler realises that Walter is not the one who should be afraid. It is everyone else in the same industry as him. In conclusion, the position of power, wealth, and dominance that Walter White obtains from his illegal activities change his core attributes as he is no longer afraid of life itself. Instead of intending to stop his business when he reaches his initial financial goal to support his family after he is gone, Walter becomes the embodiment of neoliberal values and ultimately, he continues his activities to satisfy his own needs and to continue to feel alive. Walter tells his wife that he is the most important person in a corporation that is big enough to be listed on the NASDAQ, he is the most important component in the company, and states that he, himself, is the company. Walter exerts his position of power in this moment when he frightens his wife by the amount value he brings in the illegal activities that he pursues. She was under the assumption that Walter was nothing more than a high school teacher who had lost his way because of his cancer diagnosis and firmly believed that he was in over his head and in danger. However, Walter quickly proves her wrong in an outrage of his neoliberal accomplishments that place him at the top of the patriarchal violent capitalist hierarchy. Walter’s second dawn and the power he gains from it inform the viewer that neoliberalism functioned as a catalyst for change that reshaped Walter’s masculinity into a patriarchal form of masculinity. In that way, the position of power that Walter accomplishes from neoliberal values may prove self-empowering, yet it also enforces the same toxic traits of hegemonic masculinity that are unsuitable for the family identity of men.

### [The Dichotomy of Walter White and Gustavo Fring](#)

Although, Walter’s second dawn was also heavily influenced by other characters on the show. There is a natural progression in the show where Walter gradually succumbs to the neoliberal ideology and forsake his previous values such as family. Throughout the TV-series, Walter is faced with two main archetypes: Tuco Salamanca (Raymond Cruz) and Gustavo Fring (Giancarlo Esposito). Tuco Salamanca is a psychotic Mexican drug kingpin from Albuquerque who became Walter and Jesse’s methamphetamine distributor. Tuco is the first real criminal that Walter meets and serves as a symbol of the ruthless violence and unfair business deals that corresponds to a

neoliberal market. Walter's first contact with Tuco is caused by Tuco hospitalising his companion, Jesse, who attempted to sell their meth to Tuco and use him as a distributor, and it ends with Walter threatening to kill him with his self-made bomb. Walter realises that he must match Tuco in his violence to compete on the market and not just become another cook who will be misused and underpaid by their employers. In other words, Tuco symbolises the position of power of the elite and Walter must stand his ground to ensure that he does not become yet another disposable worker. Tuco Salamanca displays the unpredictable violence of a neoliberal market multiple times, for example when he hospitalises Jesse for his request to use Tuco as a distributor, when he beats his own bodyguard to death for disrespecting him, and when he kidnaps Walter and Jesse in an attempt to make them work for the Mexican cartel. In order to deal with this type of violence and in an effort to match it, Walter creates his alter ego Heisenberg to create distance between the fatherly figure whose motivation is to support his family and the drug kingpin who must use violence and power to achieve his agenda. The alter ego represents the internal struggle within Walter as he is not ready to abandon his identity as a caretaker and provider, but he is also recognising the necessity of embodying neoliberal values to ensure his survival on the market. Walter learns the way of uninhibited violence to ensure his survival from Tuco, which he later fully adopts to assassinate all the prison inmates who could have information about his identity and operation in the episode "Gliding Over All". Tuco demonstrates the necessary tools to function as the primary power in the chain of command and Walter realises that violence is necessary to compete in the market. However, Tuco also symbolises an imperfect example of leadership. His brutality is always without thought and often places Tuco in unwanted situations. While the violence is a necessary method to retain power, Tuco acts without thought which ultimately leads to his demise. This can be seen in the example mentioned before, where Tuco beats his bodyguard to death for disrespecting him. The scene evolves from an unpredictable outburst of rage and results in Tuco creating a new and bigger problem in the form of a dead body that he now needs to dispose of. Walter realises the extremities that are incorporated into a neoliberal market, and he is faced with the option to embody those extremities or surrender and return to his family.

Gustavo Fring is a Chilean restaurateur, the proprietor of Los Pollos Hermanos, mob boss, business magnate and drug lord. He is the second archetype that Walter White encounters. Gustavo Fring, also called Gus, is a well-respected citizen who helps the community when in need and hides in plain sight. Besides his fast food restaurant, his main business is the production and distribution of methamphetamine and he is deeply involved with the Mexican Juárez cartel. Gus is a model of

professionalism and intelligence, which is something that Walter desperately strives to be. He is a calculated tactician who weighs the positives and the negatives, and while he still exerts violence as a mean to retain power, Gus's actions are not without thought like Tuco's actions were and he is only violent when every other option has been carefully considered. He ensures that his actions will not create new or bigger problems for him or his corporation. Walter is recruited by Gus to join his professional corporation of methamphetamine despite initially rejecting Walter and Jesse because of their lack of professionalism, and Walter quickly begins to admire Gus and how he runs his business. Gus is, in many ways, a near perfect example of neoliberalism through the way he protects his vulnerability from the state while being one of the more powerful and stable drug lords. Gus hides in plain sight through charity work and his legitimate business, which increases the idea that Gus understands completely how society functions and what he must do to keep his illegal activities hidden. In other words, Gus's double identity embodies the slippage between legitimate and illegitimate capitalism. Gus represents the ideal that Walter strives to be. He has a legitimate job, an incredible reach of power with almost no risk of getting caught, and claims to have a family. Walter and Gus become dependent on each other. Without Walter's product quality, Gus would not be able to sell his product, and without Gus's superior methamphetamine laboratory, Walter would not be able to produce as much meth and in a safe location. Gus creates a safe haven for Walter, but Walter follows his persona of Heisenberg into the dangers that follow his new line of work. He disregards his typical values, just like the viewer, in an effort to rise to the top. The professionalism and intelligence of Gus quickly captivates Walter, however, Gus is willing to run a clean organisation if the measures allow for it while Walter just wants to be on top of the food chain. For that reason, tension arise between Gus and Walter. The critical difference between Walter and Gus is that, while Gus sits in his associate's, Gale, apartment, he is completely aware of the evil intentions behind his deception. Gus is investigating how easily Gale can replace Walter's position at this corporation so that he can finally eliminate Walter. He acknowledges his position in the scheme of the operation and owns it. Something that Walter has never been able to do. Instead, Walter develops a whole new persona to cope with the idea. Deep down, Walter cannot even admit that to cook methamphetamine has more to do with himself than with helping his family. His desire to live up to his own expectations push him further and further into the madness, and while Gus has created an empire that seemingly bends to his will, Walter scrapes by to stay alive and out of trouble.

Neoliberalism understands labour as a human capital that is tied to the individual worker and not as an abstract element purchased on the market and attached to the production of a specific commodity. The ruthless ambition of Walter White exemplifies the extent of actions needed to succeed in a capitalist society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the episode “Box Cutter” presents the viewers with the ideas of labour discipline when Gustavo addresses the death of Gale Boetticher by slitting the throat of one of his most trusted associates just to send a message to Walter and Jesse. While neoliberalism encourages entrepreneurship in every form of the word, the capitalist with the most assets does not want to lose their position of power or the wealth that they have accumulated. Obviously, there must be a limited amount of wealth to go around, and Gus thus sends a message to Walter that he will stop at nothing to maintain his power or his fortune. Walter represents a threat to the business that Gus has created because he understands the meth market in the American Southwest and can potentially take over Gus’s operation. The murder of Gale Boetticher is an example of the disagreement between neoliberal ideology and neoliberalism in action. Both Walter and Gus use all their rational options to maximise their entrepreneurial talents to create wealth, and those who have wealth will want to keep it. Thus, Walter and Gustavo are acting on their own neoliberal options to stay alive and to stay wealthy, and the war between the two characters result in casualties of those less fortunate. Walter and Gus are both trying to discipline each other to prevent them from becoming entrepreneurial competitors (Lee, 2016). “Box Cutter” also illustrates how disposable labour is. Gustavo quickly eliminates one of his most trusted employees, illustrating the ruthlessness of neoliberal business and the core beliefs of capitalism that labour may be necessary to build an organisation, but it is also expendable. Both Tuco and Gus provide Walter with different aspects of the neoliberal ideology, but they also illustrate that power and wealth comes with it. Walter is desperate to regain his masculinity and the two archetypes demonstrates different aspects of patriarchal masculinity, such as violence, dominance, and control, which Walter quickly adopts. Although, by incorporating the neoliberal ideology into his persona, Walter is also starting to reject his initial beliefs and he begins to detach from his family and friends.

### Winning or Losing Neoliberalism

How much Walter has forgotten his initial values are further explored in the TV-series finale “Felina” as Walter’s initial reason for creating methamphetamine is now rejecting him. Walter loses his family despite being the primary reason for his choice to initiate his entrepreneurship and Walter dies alone on the concrete floor of a methamphetamine laboratory. So how can it be determined if

Walter wins or loses in the end? First, in neoliberal terms the idea of winning or losing comes down to financial success, eliminating competition in order to ensure a seat at the top of the hierarchy, to outperform the power of the state, and accomplishing your own self-interest and goals (Springer et al., 2016). Walter accomplishes his goal of securing his family financially, even if they refuse to accept his money, but he does more than that. Since his family refuses to accept or acknowledge Walter at all, he is denied his initial goal of securing his family. However, Walter seeks out Elliott and Gretchen, his two former co-workers who stole his research and pushed him out of the company to become millionaires, when they undermine his influence in their company on TV. He forces them to set up a trust fund for his son by threatening them, ensuring that his family will eventually get his money whether they want it or not. In that way, Walter not only gains control over his former business partners, but he also exploits them to accomplish his own goals of being financially successful and providing for his family. Walter overcomes Elliot with his patriarchal form of masculinity by threatening him and exercising violence. Furthermore, despite being forced into hiding, Walter returns to the world to eliminate his last competitors. Jack, the mercenary who steals Walter's corporation, and his gang who are still producing methamphetamine with Walter's recipe. Walter's biggest accomplishment in his life is now being exploited by someone who stole it from him, and he cannot let that happen. Walter eliminates every man participating in Jack's operation while saving his old companion, Jesse. Walter's recipe is his product and he ensures that no one else can produce the same quality that he can by wiping out the last remaining competitors who have knowledge of his recipe. This leaves Walter at the top of the food chain as he and Jesse are now the only one able to produce his quality product. In relation to outperforming the power of the state, Walter chose to cook methamphetamine so that he could afford his cancer treatment without leaving his family in poverty. Walter also evades law enforcement throughout the whole TV-series, and always acts as the vigilante of his self-interests. In other words, Walter did not trust the state to be able to fund his cancer treatment without financially ruining his family and he did not trust the state to help him realise his own potential. Instead, Walter relies on himself while completely isolating himself from the power of the state. In conclusion, Walter accomplishes everything he set out to when he started producing methamphetamine years earlier, and from a neoliberal point of view, Walter is a winner of both capitalism and self-empowerment.

The winner-takes-all ethos of neoliberalism is obvious at the end of the show as Walter is the sole survivor. All of his old companions and competitors are either dead or mentally unstable from years of mental torture, and, while Walter dies, he ensure that his product remains the best on the

market while, more importantly, he ensures that his product remains his own. Although, the TV-series also illustrates that Walter is yet another product of neoliberalism. Walter is nothing more than how he and Gustavo Fring treated their workers and distributors. He is disposable labour. Walter may be at the top of the corporate food chain and has a monopoly on his product, but he will die and be replaced by another neoliberal individual who will take his place in realising their potential. The TV-series forces the viewer to understand that the protagonist they have been rooting for during a 5-year period is just as disposable as all of the other characters in the show, and the ruthless market does not differentiate between the elite and the working-class in terms of potential value, they are both treated as commodities that can be bought, sold, and replaced.

In the final moments of Walter's life, he is seen walking around in a methamphetamine laboratory. He passes his final moments in the place that helped realise his full potential. The methamphetamine laboratory is where he discovered his alter ego, Heisenberg, where he proved his genius capabilities, and where his journey to regain his masculinity began. However, Walter dies on the concrete floor of the meth lab instead of with his family. His family refuses to see him, and earlier in the episode, his own son even begs him to just die instead of keep trying to contact them (*Breaking Bad*, 2008; "Felina"). The TV-series thus frames neoliberalism as the tragedy of getting what you want. Walter may be a winner in the eyes of neoliberalism, but he dies alone on a cold concrete floor alongside the materials he used to destroy his family and all that he previously treasured. *Breaking Bad* is catalysing a sociological transformation in the discourse of neoliberalism by presenting it as a negative liberal imagination. While neoliberal values and policies may be the primary factor in Walter White's empowerment and self-realisation, it is also the catalyst for his inevitable demise in which his initial core values of family have either rejected him or he has descended to a point where those core values no longer serve an interest for his own selfish values. Walter succeeded in becoming a part of the patriarchal hierarchy that he needed to regain his masculinity, but he also rejected a different and positive form of masculinity: the caring, emotional, and providing father. Walter actively chose to pursue neoliberal ideology to reshape his masculinity instead of acting on the attributes that he already possessed such as his family. In that way, Walter's masculinity relies on attributes such as power, domination, and violence and it pushed his family away as they required a different and more emotional form of masculinity. For that reason, Walter may have succeeded in becoming a part of a toxic hierarchy that enforces neoliberal ideals, but he also abandoned a positive form of masculinity which the show frames as the downfall of Walter. Walter's accomplishments appear insignificant at the end of the show as Walter is yet another

commodity. He strives to become the man his family needs but realises that the path he took had a negative impact too late, and the death of Walter is the result of him valuing neoliberal ideals higher than familial values. While Walter's cancer may serve as a catalyst for change and a warning for Walter to address the crisis in his masculinity, he ultimately ends up dying anyway. The show thus frames neoliberalism as a negative influence to the male identity and society as it provokes individuals to abandon positive attributes and instead commit to a toxic hierarchy that enforces violence and competition, which will lead to a collapse of the societal expectations of men. Walter accomplishes a second dawn, yet it is built on the destructive basis of neoliberalism that mimic the traits of hegemonic masculinity.

### Chapter 3: Masculinity and Hegemony

The following chapter presents the historical and theoretical approach of hegemonic masculinity and its involvement in Western society. The chapter discusses the analytical approaches of especially Raewyn Connell and Michael Kimmel and explores how masculinity has progressed after the Second World War into a crisis that relies on more than the subordination of women, minorities, and other men.

As stated by the professor in Gender Studies Todd Reeser (2010): "Masculinity is a concept which is consistently created and challenged in numerous ways" and masculinity is not a concept that is given when one is born as a male. Masculinity is also a concept that varies historically and cross-culturally, as the idea of gender and the associated traits change over time and many different societies differentiates in the traits associated to the concept of masculinity. According to Raewyn Connell (2005), masculinity is not an established entity fixed into the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are shapes of iterations that are accomplished in social actions and can thus differ depending on the gender relations in a particular social setting. Yet, while masculinity is a concept often associated with males, it can require tools or objects associated with femininity. In the modern Western society, the ability to provide a secure social status and provide material objects it an important attribute of masculinity and is usually and easiest shown by accompanying a woman. However, masculinity can also be divided into subtypes such as hegemonic masculinity or new man masculinity because these subgroups contain different core values.

Hegemonic masculinity is a subgroup introduced by Connell (2005) which views gender relations as complex and hierarchical and refers to the dominant form of masculinity within the gender hierarchy. Connell stresses that alternative masculinities are not erased but subordinated by

the hegemonic strain, however, the construct depends on the existence of a weaker counterpart for validation (Kimmel, Hearn, & Connell, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity subordinate other masculinities and, in most Western societies, hegemonic masculinity is associated with whiteness, heterosexuality, authority, and physical strength. Hegemonic masculinity consists of four central typologies.

The first is the concept of hegemonic masculinity itself, or ‘The correspondence between the cultural ideal and institutional power’ (Connell, 2005). The cultural ideal of masculinity does not necessarily fit the majority of men and can be different from the notion of the general idea of male sex roles. Hegemonic masculinity is commonly displayed as characters of unnatural masculinity and power, such as James Bond, Superman, or Deadpool. Real models may be publicised as a form of hegemonic masculinity, but they are so remote from everyday achievements that they constitute an unattainable ideal. Connell also state that men are conditioned to view hegemonic men as desirable and will identify themselves with them and their goals.

The second typology is subordination, or “Specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men’ (Connell, 2005). This subgroup refers to the subordination of one social group by another. As an example, homosexual men are subordinated by heterosexual men, working-class men are subordinated by middle-class men, countercultural men are subordinated by mainstream men, and so on.

The third typology is complicity, or ‘Masculinities constructed in ways that realise the patriarchal agenda, without the tensions or risks of being the frontline troops of patriarchy, are complicit in this sense’ (Connell, 2005). Complicity involves accepting, or even helping to propagate the gender system and roles, even if one does not greatly benefit from it. An example of this could be a homosexual politician voting against equal rights for homosexuals or to be non-responsive of homophobic or sexist remark.

The fourth and last typology is marginalisation, or ‘relations internal to the gender order’ (Connell, 2005). Connell mentions that American sporting stars in America may be examples of hegemonic masculinity, as they are rich and fit, but their power does not continue to other African American males, who are marginalised rather than authorised by hegemonic masculinity. On the same note, bisexuals are also a marginalised group as they are threatened by the homosexual and heterosexual binary divide (Baker & Ellege, 2011).

Hegemonic masculinity is a question of how particular groups of men possess positions of power and wealth, and how they validate and reproduce the social relationships which generate

their dominance (Connell, 2005). Subsequently, men can benefit from the control of women through hegemonic masculinity and it delivers control of other men for a small sample of men in contemporary society. The pivotal difference between hegemonic masculinity and other masculinities is not the control of women, but the control of other men (Donaldson, 1993). However, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is founded on the subordination of women, thus creating a hierarchy, where the focal point is the domination of other men. Below this hierarchy is the women, meaning that the least dominant male is still capable of using his status as a male to dominate women. This has caused the engagement in toxic males' practices such as physical violence in order to establish dominance in a given setting in order to stabilize the gender dominance (Connell, 2005).

Though it is important to acknowledge that hegemonic masculinity is ever changing, and thus not connected to specific static characteristics, there are some attributes that seem to follow the dominant male figure in western society. Richard Collier states that some characteristics are typically associated with hegemonic masculinity:

“Most accounts of hegemonic masculinity do include such “positive” actions as bringing home a wage, sustaining a sexual relationship, and being a father. Indeed, it is difficult to see how the concept of hegemony would be relevant if the only characteristics of the dominant group were violence, aggression, and self-centeredness. Such characteristics may mean domination but hardly would constitute hegemony - an idea that embeds certain notions of consent and participation by the subaltern groups” (Collier, 1998: 21).

In this quote, Collier is arguing that hegemonic masculinity must have some characteristics to be sought after for it to be the dominant form. Notably the positive attributes that are often left out, especially when hegemonic masculinity is contributed to toxic masculinity traits. With these examples of positive traits, Collier is justifying how this form of masculinity is capable of dominating both sexes and thus being the dominant force in the masculinity hierarchy. However, it is important to note how these positives can drive men to do immoral or illegal things, in order to achieve these characteristics and a status of such.

Though Connell agrees with these characteristics, as it is often these that are being discussed in order to pinpoint the ideologies of what it means to be a man. However, Connell states that these should not be the focal point of reference of the hegemonic masculinities, as it is not determined by the reflection but about the practical relations. Connell thus states that hegemonic masculinity is not

about how one appear; it is about how one acts in relation to these characteristics and thus not how one is to reflect them (Connell, 2005).

The American sociologist Michael Kimmel (1996), states that masculinity and the male ego has been in decline since the 1960s. Despite Connell stating that no clear characteristics are based on the idea of hegemonic masculinity, there are still key traits that are being associated with being a real man based on the different cultures. Some on these are mentioned by Collier in the beforementioned, and the subject of why society is met with ideals leading to sayings such as be a man, and man up that can be said with a general consensus of the meanings is further touched upon by Kimmel. This decline in masculinity is causing men to look at older more traditional forms of masculinity when trying to figure out what it should mean to be masculine, causing reinforcement of toxic traits, or men going to extreme measures to highlight their capability of the positive ones. With a rise in gender equality, men are being challenged in the household and the job market by women and minorities, making men seek to these traditional ideals or reconstructions of masculinity as seen in the neoliberal fantasy. With the decline of power in the patriarchal household men are left powerless and has to establish it in some other way – the workplace and the neoliberal ideals. In relation to this, Kimmel states that the idea proposed by Connell that hegemonic masculinity is revolving domination is more about the fear about being dominated than the domination itself (Kimmel 1996). This has the effect that men will not define their masculinity in relation to women, but in relation to other men, in a constant effort to be seen as better than the other men, thus creating the idea of the self-made man. Here it can be argued that the fear of domination and seeking to dominate will have the same outcome, being the competition for the highest position in the hierarchy. This traditional idea of masculinity, is also referring to a time in history that had distinguished lines and designated roles in the household, where white women would take care of the home and family, and the man would be decisive and made sure the family had food on the table and a roof over their heads (Kimmel, 1996). Therefore, with the diminishing borders between the sexes and gender roles, the traits of masculinity had to become more prominent and visible due to the fact that men are stuck in an identity crisis, between the traditional and the modern man. These factors are why we argue that neoliberalism has become a way for men to reconstruct their masculinity. Due to the male hierarchy and the winner-takes-all ethos of neoliberalism, the above-mentioned crisis in masculinity highlights the traits because men are lacking ways to reconstruct or display masculinity. The hierarchy of masculinity thus blends with the hierarchy of neoliberalism in terms of the portrayal of masculinity.

These characteristics Kimmel bring forth comes from a traditional view of masculinity and cannot be directly connected to hegemonic masculinity, but they are the consequence of a challenged state. However, Kimmel's idea can be used as a segue between Collier and Connell, as these characteristics are being used in a matter of asserting dominance in the male hierarchy. The key characteristics are those of being the provider, father, and husband, as historically, men in America have been using their political, economic, and social status as a way to take control of every aspect of their lives (Kimmel, 1996).

In our dissertation we wish to acknowledge these viewpoints, as it is our belief that for hegemonic masculinity to work as an analytical tool, these characteristics are important to acknowledge. However, the fluidity of them are equally is important as these characteristics Collier describe might only be apparent in western culture and only for the contemporary period. We agree that hegemonic masculinity is about how one acts in order to take the dominant role, however we believe that such of the above-mentioned characteristics can be a powerful tool in order to carry out the acts Connell emphasize on.

### The Emasculated Walter White

The following chapter deals with how the crisis of masculinity is portrayed throughout *Breaking Bad* as Walter White transforms himself from an emasculated high school teacher to the embodiment of toxic masculinity. By the transformation to become a hegemonic patriarch, Walter becomes an enforcer of the male hierarchy in this form of masculinity. Walter has a second dawn to proof himself through his cancer, but he takes the wrong path to establish himself as a man, consumed by toxic masculinity.

At Walter's birthday party, it becomes apparent to the audience how emasculated Walter is when his brother in law, Hank Schrader from the DEA, hands him a gun. He comments on how absurd the sight of Walter with a gun is to everyone and offers Walter to come along on a ride-along during their next drug bust. He laughs at Walter and tells him to put a little excitement in his stale life. As Walter is being side-lined at his party with Hank being the centre of attention, telling stories instead, and even making snide remarks how Walter looks like "Keith Richards with a glass of warm milk" as he holds a gun and a beer – something that in the hands of Hank, would make him appear even more masculine. The difference is that Hank knows how to use these attributes to dominate the other men in his presence whereas it only makes Walter uncomfortable. Brian Faucette states how guns are seen as a phallic symbol and thus as an extension of masculinity and

male potency. Therefore, by having Walter uncomfortably holding the gun, Hank gets to tell that the heft of the gun is why they hire men like him, and Walter is thus not man enough to carry the responsibility of a gun (Pierson, 2013). The crisis of Walter's masculinity is portrayed here by being afraid of the spotlight at his own party and gain control. This causes him to be dominated by Hank in front of the other men despite it being a party in his house designed to be celebrating him. Furthermore, Hank goes to the extent of interrupting Walter and the other guests to draw focus to himself being interviewed after a drug bust, ultimately taking control of the party along with Walter, who is too submissive to intervene (Pierson, 2013). Michael Kimmel notes in a speech, that academic engagement is seen as questionable regarding masculinity (Kimmel, 2016). An example of it is seen in Hank jokingly using Walter's level of education as fuel for ridiculing. However, in terms of hegemonic masculinity, if the level of education is being used as a way of securing a sizeable income, this too becomes a mean of dominance as it is seen with Elliot. Walter does not have a say in his own life as this point. His wife decides what food he should eat, and Hank functions as the dominant male in his own house, positioning Walter at the bottom of the patriarchal male hierarchy. Walter is so submissive due to the crisis of masculinity he is experiencing, that he has not found a way for him to take control of his life and home. Walter's emasculation culminates in bed when his wife, Skyler satisfies him sexually while bidding on an internet auction. In the bedroom, Walter is as passive as he is in his life, and the pilot episode suggests that Walter is suffering from a personal crisis of masculinity and that it is likely linked to his regret in not taking the risks of becoming a research scientist. Through flashbacks it is implied how Gretchen was Walter's true love as Amanda Lotz (2014) notes, and the breakup between Gretchen and Walter was the reason he quit the Grey Matter business. Walter thus feels inadequate by the choices he has made that shaped the rest of his life. He pushed himself away from a woman he loved, he sold his company shares for \$5000 that would be worth billions. Instead, he is struggling to pay bills through the two jobs he is working, his son is disabled and he lives in a sexless marriage. Walter pities himself, as he has been forced into this life he did not choose. In perspective to the neoliberal ideals regarding masculinity, Walter is less masculine and a failure as he did not make the decision to increase his wealth.

Earlier in the episode, Walter collapses at his second job and learns that he has inoperable, advanced stage lung cancer (Breaking Bad, 2008). Cancer is considered a disease of repression, or inhibited passion and it has become the predominant disease metaphor in Western culture, and the cancer in *Breaking Bad* can be perceived as a metaphor for how Walter's body is revolting against

his systemic passivity and inability to assert his will in his life. His body is sickened by his repressive nature and lifestyle, and functions as a last warning to change his life. Moreover, cancer is associated with death and causes disturbance to its victims, as it reminds them that their death is either closer than they assumed or imminent. The cancer thus also functions as a catalyst for change as it forces its victims to act on their own will and selfishness rather than passively waiting for the end to arrive. What the cancer is underlining is how Walter's masculinity is in danger. If he is not capable of taking control of his masculinity it will be killing him, ultimately stripping away every sense of agency by death. Walter's masculinity is non-existent. The cancer is a warning light which indicates that Walter must undergo a social change to reconstruct his masculinity. He needs to find a way to regain his masculinity as the male's masculinity is so deeply tied to the identity of the man that without it, he will lose himself completely. Walter is lost in his identity crisis and thus turns to neoliberalism to reconstruct his masculinity because he favours the patriarchal masculinity hierarchy. This reflects contemporary society where men are led to extremities to regain a sense of their masculine self, driving men to extreme measures both such as illegal activities and suicide as reactions to their sense of inadequacy.

Throughout the five first episodes the portrayal of an emasculated man is created, which becomes the beginning of the arch of Walter White's evolution of masculinity. The reason why these first episodes can be pinpointed as the beginning as well as the exact point where Walter chooses to change, can be seen in the fifth episode as an especially crucial one from where he begins the change from an emasculated, high school teacher that is being undermined by friends and family to the drug lord kingpin he later becomes. At this point he has already cooked and sold his first batch of meth, teamed up with his old high school student as a distributor and even killed a man, which begs the question; why is the fifth episode the real tipping point of the arch of masculinity and why has the definite change not happened prior to this. Walter swears off Jesse's money and wants nothing to do with their business, after killing a man Walter deems that it is not a life for him. At this point, Walter is not ready to embody the neoliberal winner-takes-all ethos to strengthen his masculinity, which is why he, at this point, is still stuck as an emasculated man. In this fifth episode of the show, Walter and Skylar is at a birthday party at Walter's old college friends Elliott and Gretchen's place. When in college, the three of them established the research that would lead to the Grey Matter company that made Elliott and Gretchen billionaires – the one Walter chose to leave. The difference between Elliott and Walter supports the idea that Walter is not a real man for different reasons. Assuming they are both turning 50 on the foundation that it is declared

that Walter turns 50, however where Walter is being served eggs with veggie-bacon because they need to watch their cholesterol, Elliot is being celebrated in a much more extravagant fashion. Bridget Cowlshaw argues how it shows that Walter is not in control over his wife or living situation, as he is being foisting veggie bacon in front of his son, who on the other hand unwillingly turns the fake bacon away (Cowlshaw, 2015). His wife is telling him that they need to watch his health, suggesting he is old and weak – someone who needs the care for survival. On the other end of the spectrum, Elliot is establishing his dominance as he sits in the middle of the crowd while being handed numerous presents, making him appear like a god receiving offerings. As a counterpart to Walter, Elliot is not in need of people to make his decisions for him or bring him stuff out of concern for his health. Furthermore, Elliot is the centre of attention, however comparatively to Walter's party, Walter has no friends over that are interested in him. Walter is being depicted as a failure throughout the episode with constant reminders of his failures as a man. He is being compared to Elliot's success, both through their individual professional accomplishments, and their family achievements. Regarding neoliberalism, Elliot is at the top of the hierarchy, having the lesser men bringing him numerous presents. The size comparison of their houses further shows Elliot as the winner. The expensive house and decor are the embodiments of neoliberalist success. The entire séance supports the value capitalism holds, that is deeply embedded in neoliberalism. The birthday party is an excuse for spending money, and how closely masculinity is tied to neoliberalism is seen in the underlying competition of who is able to gift the most expensive present. Just like how Hank's gun serves as a phallic extension of masculinity, these presents are an extension of their respective level of success. Furthermore, Elliot is being portrayed as a popular man. Not only by the size of the crowd, but by the status of the people in it, which is seen as Elliot is being gifted a signed guitar that had belonged to Eric Clapton. Walter addresses the situation by asking what one would give the man who has everything, but what is apparent is Walter's insecurity of not being able to gift such an expensive present as a rare guitar. Not only is Walter being dominated by Elliot's presence and accomplishments, but also by the other guests, who are showing off their wealth through what they are capable of giving away. Wealth is important in neoliberal values as it is used to display your position of power and status. In the scene, Walter is being undermined by the other guests simply by not being able to display any wealth at all. Earlier it is mentioned that Walter pities himself for how his life turned out. With the missed opportunity that occurred when he sold his shares he feels as if he should have been in the position Elliot is in. Where Elliot took the risky neoliberal path with the business, Walter was too

insecure, and it has been punishing him ever since. Elliot is the embodiment of a successful male who can employ different aspects of masculinity. Elliot is, like Walter, just another man in the neoliberal game as exemplified by his successful business. However, Elliot does not portray the same form of patriarchal masculinity that is often associated with neoliberalism. Instead, he has reconstructed his masculinity through nurture, empathy, and providing for his family. While Walter was unable to retain masculinity from the same aspects and eventually resorts to violence, domination, and aggression to assert himself as masculine, Elliot even extends his providing role when he offers to pay for Walter's cancer treatment

At the party, Walter and Skylar appear to be oblivious to how high society events function which leads them to overdress, thus standing out as clueless. All of the other attendants are wearing the same style of clothing, dressed in bland beige colours, which makes Walter and Skylar stand out even more. In the beginning of the episode, Walter even indicates himself that he feels inferior to Elliot and his money through his insecurity about the present he has chosen for him. Walter wanders off into the library when he sees articles about Elliot's accomplishments, showing that even without the physical embodiment of Elliot's presence, he is still positioned above him in the male hierarchy. These articles can also be seen in reference to the plaque which the audience see Walter look at in the first episode, where it states it had been given for "contribution to research awarded the Nobel prize" (Breaking Bad, 2008; "Pilot"), portraying Walter as an antagonist and barely being contributor as the butt of a joke, rather than the protagonist and centre of attention. At the party it is further shown rather than spoken as Walter wanders around in the library. In the library, Walter is shown from afar, making him seem small and out of place in the grand scheme of things, which is one of the other cinematic effects used to make Walter seem as the inferior man. Just as with the clothing where Walter and Skylar are clearly shown in a setting, they do not belong nor have any knowledge of, Walter is now in a setting where he is being undermined by the accomplishments of Elliot, which again serves as a reminder of Walter's own failures. In the neoliberal ideals there is a constant battle of being the winner, which is closely tied to the male identity. By adopting the neoliberal ideals, a man is capable of showing off one's success thus being more masculine. The success therefore equals dominance in the male hierarchy, which is shown in these scenes by having Walter stand out of the community as the only loser.

Elliot offers Walter a job. In this moment, Elliot is taking away what small sense of accomplishment and pride Walter had just gotten, just as fast, showing how much power Elliot holds over Walter. In the beginning of this scene, Walter and Elliot are conversing on equal terms;

as equal men. They are talking about when they used to work together and how they could take on working together, but with the small sentence regarding health insurance, Walter is portrayed as a man of low status due to his financial situation. Moreover, as the man's identity is so closely tied to his professional career, by suggesting Walter can work for Elliot as an employer and not with him, positions him below Elliot, not only in the workspace but also in the male hierarchy as a result of it. Regarding Collier's theory of masculinity, he touches upon this, as a trait of being masculine is the aspect of providing for his family, which is a pivotal point in this show. With this remark, Elliot is showing that he is more than capable of providing for his own family, he is even willing to take away Walter's role of the man in the house and thus provide for him and his family, thus stripping away one of the biggest characteristics of manhood. In the different forms of masculinity Elliot excels in it all. He is a provider for his family and positioned at the top of the corporate hierarchy while he is capable of staying emotionally connected to his family. This is further what Laura Hudson argues in her article in *Wired*, where she states how Walter would literally rather die than accept Elliot and Gretchen's charity, as it would make him feel less of a man (Hudson, 2013).

After Walter has his pride beaten at the party, he and Skyler leave and instead of facing his insecurities he turns his anger towards Skyler. He feels less of a man due to the fact that Skyler was talking about his private affairs with other people, making it seem as he does not have a say in his own life. With regards to the male hierarchy, with the dominant male on top, in this case Elliot, Walter might be accepting of his failures that has shaped his life as a non-dominant character that his own insecurities enforce. However, how women play into the hierarchy, or rather how they are outside it, is seen in how it is hurting Walter's pride, to have a woman taking agency from him and making decisions for him thus emasculating him. This shows how masculinity is dependent on women to be subordinated to men in order for them to be completely masculine therefore, Walter is seen as less masculine when he is not capable of following these norms. Even further, Walter sees Skyler as begging the dominant male for welfare, ultimately degrade his masculinity and even suggesting that Walter is not fulfilling the standards of being the man of the household and feels publicly humiliated as the inferior man. In relation to this, the only possibility Walter has at this point to re-establish his masculinity, is to externalise his feelings towards Skyler. This outburst of rage also shows that Walter cares more about his male ego than his health and ultimately the better of the family altogether. As Skyler is telling people about his illness, Walter is seen as a fragile and sick man. By letting them know, it is shown that Walter is not capable of bearing the financial burden to the societal standards. Additionally, Skyler is taking the male role of the provider which

is emasculating Walter. By having a woman taking control of him, means that he is incapable of fulfilling the standards of the hegemonic male. A man is supposed of being in control therefore being undermined by a woman makes him insecure which results in his outburst of rage.

Skyler asking Elliot for help becomes the beginning of Walter's change, which comes to show in the final part of the episode, where his family is having an intervention, where they try to convince Walter to take the cancer treatment as he now wants no money from Elliot and does not want the treatment at all. In this scene, the family consisting of Skyler, Walter Jr., Hank and Marie, is seated around Walter, each encouraging him to take the treatment, and Elliot's money. Walt Jr. blurts out at Walter "you're a pussy ... you're scared of a little chemotherapy" (Breaking Bad, 2008; "Gray Matter"), which might be the strongest remark towards Walter despite being the shortest. Being called a pussy, and therefore being questioned on his courage and manhood cuts especially deep, when it comes from his own son. Walt Jr. makes his point by referring to his own disability of cerebral palsy, stating that how can a father not go through chemotherapy, when a young boy can undergo the struggles of such a disability. As Walter Jr. has not yet felt the societal pressure of masculinity on himself, he chooses to disregard it because he values the health of his father higher than the power struggles of masculinity. Instead of Walter being a provider of the family, the illness would make him nothing but a burden to the family in Walter's opinion, leaving him powerless and ultimately a lesser man. Walter Jr. does not understand importance of the masculine responsibility creating a mismatch between their understanding of the situation. Furthermore, the word pussy is one used almost exclusively about men as a derogatory term to reduce men from masculine to feminine. Secondly, age has a big part in the male hierarchy, because a father should be showing his status and dominance as the patriarch, so by having one's son showing such a lack of respect is devastating to Walter's ego. However, as Wille et al., states, Walter Jr. is not yet fully understanding of the financial burden, which is why Walter's rejection of the therapy is being seen as cowardly and selfish (Wille, 2014). Hank brings some humour into the scene by offering the idea that maybe Walter just wants to die like a man. This line is being delivered as a humorous intend, however it shows a deeper meaning of what the ideals of being a man holds. It shows that there is a nobility in choosing how one is to die. A man's role is to be dominant, have control and take responsibility. Therefore, by not wanting to take the chemotherapy, Walter might live a shorter life, but he will die on his own terms, and not being taken care of by nurses at a hospice. By committing to the treatment, Walter would therefore hand over the control to doctors and nurses. To this, Hank is therefore, even if jokingly, stating that dying like a man, would mean he should risk his life,

before he would give up his control – as if it was foreshadowing the rest of the show. Marie follows up by stating that she thinks Walter should be doing whatever he wants to do, as she, through her professional career, has witnessed numerous people suffer through chemotherapy. The takeaway from her statement is that Walter should be given a choice as it is his life, which is exactly what Walter has longed to feel, as expressed through his monologue. They start yelling at each other whether or not this should be Walter's choice, until he himself steps in, which is a turning point in the series, where Walter decides that this is in fact his choice. When he breaks up the argument, he takes control for the first time. Walter whistles loudly, making the room quiet, stands up and rips the pillow from Marie's grip, along with the body language as he is standing above the crowd, and verbally stating that he has got the talking pillow now. He is taking control:

“What I want, what I need is a choice ... sometimes I feel like I never actually make any of my own, choices I mean. My entire life. It just seems I never, you know, had a real say about any of it. Now this last one, cancer, all I have left is how I choose to approach this” (Breaking Bad, 2008; “Gray Matter”).

Walter does not want to be a dead man only kept alive artificially. He wants to live, and he wants his legacy to be as such. The following day, Walter spends time weighing the options he has been given, which leads him into taking the treatment, due to the fact that his family would otherwise be resenting him for the rest of his life. However, he still wants no help from Elliot and Gretchen because they built a fortune on his research, so to take their money would be equal to forgive them or accept the fact that they build their empire on his work – something that Walter cannot do because he would be accepting his identity as a loser regarding the neoliberal ideal. This is why this becomes a pivotal point in the change of Walter, being that taking these factors into account, his only option is to sell meth, and he accepts the fact that it means doing things, such as murder, which he swore off in the beginning. With this option, Walter accepts that fact that he cannot decide the way he dies, he can, however, decide how he spends the last time of his life. Wille argues how this intervention comes to show how deeply the patriarchal belief, that men should be the ultimate provider is rooted in society. Furtherly, Wille argues how this scenario is highlighting the struggles Walter initially have with the conceptualised idea of being a man as the provider that is unobtainable for him. Despite the fact that Walter and Skyler have a relationship, where they each share a parental responsibility, Walter cannot escape the societal expectation of bearing the financial burden he feels he must carry (Wille, 2014). The patriarchal idea of the man being the ultimate provide is thus shown how deeply intertwined the idea is with masculinity. Because Walter

is not capable of fulfilling his role as a provider as well as not striving for economic growth, but merely survival, he is less masculine and has to rely on more traditional attributes, such as violence to regain a sense of power and control.

### Embracing Violence

Violence is one of the most basic and animalistic forms of dominating other men and in *Breaking Bad* the only form of communication is the one of violence, as presented by the wars against the drug cartels, competing gangs, and the battles against law enforcement. In relation to hegemonic masculinity, violence therefore becomes a key factor in establishing dominance. The goal is to intimidate others, thus either gaining respect or strike fear. As the male angst has grown since the 1960s and men are feeling as if they have no control, their biological strength is one of the traits they are able to turn to. Even though money, social status, and political power are dominant factors, it all diminishes if it comes down to physical power (Pierson, 2013). Kimmel (1996) notes, that this factor of violence and brutality is seen all the way down at the school yard level, where the characteristic bullies will pick on the weaker kids. Just like violence can be a method to intimidate other men as shown in *Breaking Bad*, violence is a defence mechanism to regain control of a situation or to regain a position of power. Kimmel (1996) thus states that the compulsive need to display one's masculinity through violence is founded on insecurities in men (Kimmel, 1996).

Pierson (2013) notes on how the Latino Americans in the show is a portrayal of the hyper-masculinity standards of the show. They are so extreme in their depiction of masculinity through their aggression, sexism, and the willingness to take risks. The depiction of the Latino Americans is shown through the mediated culture that show them in association with the violent drug lords in the Mexican cartels that is affecting the social behaviours regarding them. This portrayal therefore positions them on a masculine high ground in relation the hegemonic hierarchy (Pierson, 2013). Walter White neither has the physical frame to compete with these, nor respect of the Mexican cartel to his aid, therefore, Walter has to challenge their masculinity in other ways.

Murder is one of the acts that Walter is forced to do in the very beginning of the show, that makes Walter turn away from the life of crime early on. Here it should be mentioned that murder is being used as a plot point early on to move the story along, however, it does function as a way of foreshadowing the oncoming struggles Walter will meet. Murder also functions as an extreme portrayal of the winner-takes-all ethos that is behind the neoliberal idea as well as the dominance of hegemonic masculinity. It is a portrayal of these, because by eliminating a competitor through

murder, it allows for Walter to take his place in the hierarchy – climbing the ladder to become a winner. Eliminating the competition altogether becomes the ultimate way of dominating other men, leaving the one carrying out the act as the more masculine male. As he accepts that it is what comes with the line of work, he has to fully embrace it. In order to fully embrace the violence and the criminal ways, Walter therefore creates the alter ego, Heisenberg, which allows him to commit heinous acts – a name that will later be known and feared. In the first episodes of the show, a conflict arises between their distributor Krazy-8 and Jesse and Walter, where the execution of Krazy-8 and his associate become the only option to secure the safety of, not only Walter and Jesse, but also their families. Walter tries to rationalise the killing of him by making a pros and cons list. By doing that, Walter is hoping to be able to justify it, or come up with any alternative to killing him. This is an instance of neoliberal values, where individuals carefully weigh the pros and cons and make logical decisions based on the personal values, they can get out of it. The list further functions as a tool to take away some responsibility away from Walter to lighten his consciousness. At this point, Walter has not committed to the cause or accepted the violence that follows. Krazy-8 even states himself, that Walter should let him go, and that he was not suited for this line of work. Walter brings him food and talks with the man, as he is chained up in the basement of Jesse's house, treating him more as a houseguest than a prisoner, because he not yet has accepted violence to promote his masculinity and success. It is only in self-defence that Walter manages to execute him, as Krazy-8 plans to kill Walter with a piece of porcelain from a dinnerplate. Even to the point when Krazy-8 is being strangled in the chains, Walter pants "I'm sorry" multiple time, until Krazy-8's lifeless body falls to the ground in a way to redeem his actions, and as Pierson (2013) notes, as a way to maintain his humanity. However, in preservation of himself, he is keeps himself as a subordinated male, because the ideals of the hegemonic male states that he must be confident in his decision making without falling subject to emotions.

By becoming the persona of Heisenberg, Walter gets the power to choose and the freedom that comes from the lack of empathy. Though the persona, Walter gets to adopt a different kind of masculinity, that allows him to be more violent, ruthless, and extreme. As Walter wants to expand his and Jesse's business, Walter is beginning to show the first signs of taking upon the new hyper-masculine persona. It is seen in such instances as when Walter is pressuring Jesse to go talk to the psychotic drug dealer Tuco about buying their product. Here, Walter adopts the language that has been spoken by Hank earlier, and in part Walter Jr, as Walter tells Jesse to "grow some balls", implying that by not taking the risk of talking to Tuco, Jesse would be a lesser man with the lack of

male genitalia. Jesse gets beaten up by Tuco with a bag of money as a way of mocking him, to the point where he is put in the hospital. Jesse wants a deal with Tuco because Tuco has the power to accumulate a substantial wealth, placing him above Jesse in the masculinity hierarchy, even to such an extent that Tuco physically beats Jesse with money. As Jesse functions as an extension of Walter, this instance unfolds to the final part of the creation of Heisenberg. Furthermore, being beaten with a bag of money becomes a striking image of the neoliberal idea that money is an extension on one's success as a self-made man and the power that comes with it. Tuco is of such higher standing than Jesse, that he is shoving it in his face. With Walter wanting to push through the hierarchy, he has to show that he is no longer a pushover and decides to go talk to Tuco himself. Before doing so however, Walter fully emerges into Heisenberg, as he shaves his head and leaving the moustache matching his physical appearance with the internal masculinity of his persona. As Walter appears at the morning table with his family, revealing his new look, Walter Jr. is the first to break the silence with a smirk and the only words "badass, dad" (Breaking Bad, 2008; "Crazy Handful of Nothin"). This is the first visual step in displaying his masculinity. The change is fuelled by his cancer, as it is shown in the shower how the hair was beginning to fall out, and Walter takes control over the situation and shaves the hair off himself, showing that he chooses how to be alive, he is in control of his look. It is interesting to look at Walter Jr.'s remark in this instance, as he previously looked up to his uncle Hank, the big, bald, badass of a DEA-agent. Now Walt Jr. is looking at his father with the same ideas, because Walter is displaying the dominance and self-confidence that has only before been seen in Hank. Being bald, is often contributed to a higher level of the male hormone, testosterone, thus being more of a man than others. In a study on dominance and nonverbal behaviour, it has been studied how male baldness is being socially perceived. The study found that a shaved scalp is associated with dominance, they were seen as stronger and even taller (Mannes, 2013). The study further notes, that thinning hair was ranked as a lesser perception of dominance. Therefore, when Walter is taking control of his situation and fully shaving his head, he is displaying his level of confidence and is the more dominant male. Walter completes the look of his alter ego, Heisenberg, by dressing in dark clothes with black sunglasses and a black hat. Brian Faucette (2013), notes how these actions show that Walter is now aware that he must assume control of the situation and responsibility for the violence towards Jesse (Pierson, 2013). Walter blows Tuco's drug den up, and demands money for the drugs, compensation for Jesse's sufferings as well as a future deal. The flabbergasted Tuco with his office left in ruins, has no choice but to

accept, as he gets Walter his money and only blurts out: “You got balls, I’ll give you that” (Breaking Bad, 2008; “Crazy Handful of Nothin”).

Walter embraces the violence numerous times after this to a point where he has become completely desensitised to it, and resort to violence every time he has to protect himself or his family, as well as he begins to use it to intimidate or push himself through the hierarchy with no regard for human life. This escalates throughout the rest of the show in instances such as Walter killing two hitmen at point blank range in order to save Jesse, and thus demonstrating to Jesse that Walter is willing to do anything to protect and secure his pride and ego. Walter further convinces Jesse that Gale Boetticher needs to die because Gus would otherwise have Walter and Jesse killed. When Walter becomes obstructed, Jesse must therefore be the one to kill Gale – an action that traumatises Jesse through the rest of the show, whereas Walter barely bats an eye. As Gus wants to kill Jesse and Walter, Skyler becomes increasingly concerned for Walter, to which Walter responds with the iconic scene previously mentioned in chapter 2, where Walter underlines that he is no longer a man who needs to be taken care of. At this point, there is not much left of Mr. Chips, as was seen in the timid high school teacher in the beginning of the show. Walter is well aware of what he is capable of, and demands the respect he thinks should follow him, and if not through being a loving husband, he will have respect and dominance through intimidation, making him truly follow the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity. The bespoke scene is shot from below making Walter seem even more intimidating, with him physically talking down to Skyler. The scene begins with the two of them seated on the bed, conversing in eye-height, however as the conversation unfolds and Walter feels the need to show how masculine he has become, he stands up, thus physically raises himself above her showing how inferior she is to him. In doing this, it is portrayed through his body language of waving his arms, and walking around the room, how Walter is taking control of the room and the situation.

Walter's battle to regain masculinity and rising to the top of the hegemonic and neoliberal hierarchy concludes with Walter killing Gus. Walter is trying to reassure Skyler that they do not need to worry anymore, because he won, which shows that everything is about winning for Walter. By winning, he wants Skyler to see how he has brought safety for the family, but the only thing he has truly won is the eradication of an opponent, making him the next king pin drug lord. The idea of winning in this scene is once again referring to the neoliberalist ideal, where it is a constant battle to be the winner, by eliminating the opponents. However, what Walter is not realising is that Skyler is at this point not worrying about the Mexican cartel, she is afraid of what Walter is becoming, which

makes her try to take herself and the kids away from him. However, as Faucette notes, Walter is no longer the same man, and by threatening him, she is questioning his authority. Walter has become a man who is manipulating the people around him in order to get him what he wants to the point where he is poisoning a child, and being an accomplice to another child being shot and killed only to not get caught (Faucette, 2013). Near the ending of the show, the arc of Walter's masculinity comes to a full. Walter kills off Mike, the henchman who worked Gus before, who had been helping Walter and Jesse after the death of Gus. However, as Mike refuses to give out names of Gus' associates, Walter becomes frustrated with Mike, as he does not want to comply out of fear, something that Walter has grown accustomed to. By not complying, Mike is challenging Walter's authority and he ends up shooting and killing Mike. Faucette states, that by fully becoming Heisenberg, he is reclaiming the masculinity he was missing before through brute force, intimidation, and stubbornness. Despite his evildoings, and the family he has left behind, he is still taking the identity of a real man where his manhood is restored through retaking control of his home, relationship, and business (Faucette, 2013). This can ultimately be seen in season 5 the episode "Say My Name", where Walter is meeting with new associates from a different state, allowing his product to be distributed in bulk. In the meeting in the desert, Walter is establishing his dominance by having the distributor say his name out loud, claiming that he is fully aware of his identity, without having introduced himself, showing the grasp of the reputation he has grown. Through brutality and intimidation, he has raised himself above the other men, in such a fashion that he has the other men introduce him for him. Walter has built himself a God complex, where his ego has gotten so big, he assumes everyone is aware of his famous identity as Heisenberg. Furthermore, he is removing all sense of self that he had as he fully commits to the persona of Heisenberg. The shred of the humane Walter that was left is now gone, and Heisenberg is not a persona, but who he is. With this adaptation, he is not only leaving behind his humanity, he is disbanding the roles of the provider, father, and husband. In the chase of fulfilling the societal ideals of the beforementioned roles, Walter driven himself further away from it, showing that being perceived as a provider is much more valuable than acting it out.

### [Being a Provider, Father, and Husband](#)

This chapter investigates the importance of the father as a patriarch in the nuclear family. The chapter will look at different factors of how Walter is living up to the societal standards of a father. Regarding this, both the relationship with his biological children will be analysed, but also the

relationship Walter has with Jesse. Finally, the role Hank portrays as a father and an anti-hegemonic masculinity character will be underlined.

### Being a Provider

Stella Bruzzi (2005) sheds light upon the status of fatherhood in her book *Fatherhood and Hollywood* as she emphasizes the impact the portrayal of the father has in American culture. Through Bruzzi's analysis of the depiction of fatherhood in American television, she concludes that the depiction has changed from a traditional, supporting father, as seen in the 1950's nuclear family ideals, to a flawed father figure and household (Pierson, 2013). In *Breaking Bad* a flawed fatherhood model is seen in the form of Walter who takes extreme measures to fulfil the traditional roles of masculinity and fatherhood in times that do not have clearly marked gender roles. Michael Kimmel notes that in the shifting times of political and socioeconomic status, men are struggling to find their adjusted place in society as well as in the household which is where the role of the provider is being affected. Kimmel states, that the result of this confusion is that men either tend to fall on either side of the spectrum "falling somewhere between eager embrace of women's equality and resigned acceptance" (Kimmel, 2010;15). Kimmel further notes that in these times and economy, a man that is unable to provide for his family is barely a man at all with the historical background of the US:

"Since the country's founding, American men have felt a need to prove their manhood. For well over a century, it's been in the public sphere, and especially the workplace, that American men have been tested. A man may be physically strong, or not. He may be intellectually or athletically gifted, or not. But the one thing that has been non-negotiable has been that a real man provides for his family. He is a breadwinner." (Kimmel, 2010; 325).

For Walter, this idea of being a real man, through the ways of providing for his family, is ultimately what drives him to produce methamphetamine, as he realises that through those ways, he will be more than capable of providing for his family than if he remained a high school teacher. This also underlines the influence the neoliberal ideal has had on the transformation to modern day masculinity. As it has been embedded in Western society that a real man is one that provides, it pushes men to constantly strive for economical gain, and if Walter had stayed in his position where he had stagnated, he was therefore less of a man. In contemporary society, where the gender borders are more fluid, men are left to compare their neoliberal success as a breadwinner as an extension of their masculinity. Brian Faucette argues that:

“The importance of being seen as a provider and a protector is one of the key themes the series addresses as it presents an image of an America where it is no longer possible for most men to be the “bread winner” without having more than one job. Despite the fact that Walt is a man with advanced degrees in science and a teacher, he is forced to work after school at a car wash to help keep the family afloat. Walt’s wife Skyler (Anna Gunn) who is eight months pregnant reminds him to not let the owner screw him on his work hours again. Her statement shows her concern for the family but also indicates that in effect Skyler is the person who is in charge in the home, which is a situation that as the series moves forward it seeks to destabilize in an attempt to make Walt feel masculine and in control.” (Faucette, 2013;76-77)

Walter is able to reclaim his masculinity through his money and the power that came along with the empire; however, it is at the expense of his relationship with his family. The family is slowly diminishing as the drug empire takes over every aspect of Walters life, up until the point where Walter is being told to leave, and he misses the birth of his daughter because he was working for Gus. Walter becomes unsure, whether the money is reason enough to keep lying to his family, after seeing the harm it has done and left him in his house alone with his money. However, Gus uses the ideas of the traditional man as incentive to Walter stating:

“What does a man do, Walter? A man provides. When you have children, you will always have family. They will always be your priority, your responsibility. And a man, a man provides. And he does it even when he’s not appreciated, or respected, or even loved. He simply bears up and he does it. Because he’s a man.” (Breaking bad, 2008; "Más").

Gus is trying to get Walter to work for him, and in doing this, Gus knows that he needs to convince him through ways that relate to Walter’s male ego. In this, Gus makes it seem like Walter has no other choice than to work for him, if he still wants to be a man. Gus is thus using these traditional values to keep him. By addressing these values, Gus is further challenging Walter on his relation to economic gain. If Walter declined the offer, he would be less masculine by deliberately damaging his opportunity for a financial gain. The reasoning is that if Walter stays, he will be able to achieve financial stability and even if Walter will no longer be with his family, he will still be the provider of them. This shows how the role of fatherhood is capable of overshadowing the comfort or maybe even the true wellbeing of the family. As with after the scene with the intervention of Walter’s cancer treatment, when Walter chooses that his line of work will require evildoings, he now accepts that if he shall not only provide, but also be the real man, he must accept that it is done on the expense of his relationship with his family. Walter had the chance to turn his back on the life of deceptions, but he chose to further involve himself in business with Gus. By doing this, Walter also shows that he does not care as much for providing for his family than he wants to be known as a

man who provides (Faucette, 2013). Gus is aware of Walter's insecurities and plays this to his advantage, and Walter's ego and neoliberal ideals weigh so heavily on him that he cannot let the opportunity go. One of the focal points of the show is the regret Walter feels for letting the business opportunity go when he sold his shares in the Grey Matters company and missed the chance of becoming a billionaire. This missed opportunity branded Walter's sense of self as a loser therefore, as Gus is addressing the role of the provider, declining was never an option for Walter because he now sees a second opportunity for being a winner where he before lost in every aspect of his life, however the opportunity occurs by sacrificing the emotional role of a father.

### Being a Father

In the previous sections, the theme of being a proper provider for one's family as a man is one of the traits in association with masculinity, and it was elaborated on how Walter could not fulfil this role. Being a father, husband and a provider are some of the major focal points of this show, as securing a future for his family is one of the core motivations for going into the drug business. However, it is clear that the motive is more about his pride than care for his family which ultimately shows the fragility of the male ego as it is dependent of living up to societal standards of fatherhood. This following section will look the importance of fatherhood and provider in relation to the arc of Walter's masculinity.

Little is known about the relationship Walter had to his own parents, and it is only briefly touched upon in the episode "Salud" in season four of the show in a conversation with Walt Jr. As Walter tries to excuse his drunk behaviour and being beaten up, he tells Walt Jr. how his life had been with his late father's rapidly declining health due to Huntington's disease. Walter describes the disinfectant smells of the hospitals that were reeking of Lysol and bleach, and how the image of his father curled up, lifeless with the sound of his breath as if he was empty inside giving off a rattling sound "like if you were shaking an empty spray paint can" (Breaking Bad 2008; "Salud"). Media scholar Amanda Lotz (2014) states how "Fathers are significant to protagonists' identity negotiations even when absent" (Lotz, 2014;74). This is reflected in this brief moment where Walter is telling about his own father. The abovementioned imagery of his father still haunts him, despite the fact him just being a child when his father passed away. This further supports the idea, that Walter would not let the cancer take control, thus leaving his son with the same memories of him, rattling in a hospital bed. Wille (2014) suggests that the cancer functions as a catalyst for change in Walter's mind to take the control he was lacking before. The fear of leaving Walt Jr. with

a similar image of his father, is thus being used as incitement to, as Hank jokingly states, go die like a man. As earlier mentioned, the cancer functions as a catalyst for change in Walter's life to take the control he had not had before as touched upon by Kovvali (2013). Therefore, the cancer becomes the motivation to reclaim masculinity through control, which is seen as he states: "Right from the start it's a death sentence (...) That's what they keep telling me. Well guess what? Every life comes with a death sentence ... Maybe even today I'm going to hear some bad news, but until then. Who's in charge? Me. That's how I live my life." (Breaking bad, 2008; "Hermanos"). This quote demonstrates the power Walter is getting from the cancer as it has forced him to take control of his own life. Walter has always lacked control, and as previously mentioned, he feels he have been wrongfully placed in a life that he is not living. Walter lost his father as young and has the trauma of his father's inability to take control of anything due to his illness. By having cancer as a death sentence and to further being able to prove the doctors who have given him the sentence, wrong Walter is not only taking control over his own life as a patriarch, but also as a man that proves the experts wrong and beating death, that ultimately lets him reclaim a great sense of masculinity through accomplishment.

Jesse's parents have a more apparent role in the show, which showcases how Jesse has been pushed to the life of drugs. It is portrayed how Jesse has been brought up in an upper-middle class family, from which he had been shunned due to his excessive drug usage. In the episode 4 "Cancer Man" when Jesse wanders into his parents' back yard, after a night of drug-infused partying, Jesse's father has a change of heart, and wants to let him into their care, but the mother reminds him of the many times Jesse had let them down. Wille (2014), sheds light upon, how these parents are breaking down the traditional gender-normative roles, by having the father being the inclusive and caring person, who wants to forgive and take care of their son. Regarding the ideal hetero-normative gender roles of the nuclear family, it could be expected that the mother would take the nurturing role, but instead she appears cold towards him and cutting him off entirely. This could be seen as a refreshing take, in a show that circles the idea of toxic masculinity, and how the way of dominance is the only way to progress. However, this argument falls apart by once again having the standards of hegemonic masculinity dominate, as Jesse takes over their house, by forcing the sale of the house to a ridiculously low price. Instead of following through with the atypical gender roles of Jesse's parents, Jesse is taking advantage of their situation and gets the price down to what he can pay with his ill-gotten gains through extortion. Jesse strong-arming his parents is similar to the scene where Walter is called a pussy by his son, because the sons do not have respect for the

household patriarchs. Jesse goes against his parents, and specifically his father, because the money Jesse has earned has given him a new sense of power that allows him to stand up to his father, thus becoming the more dominant male. Moreover, by forcing the price down on the house, Jesse is fully embodying the neoliberalist idea of the winner-takes-all ethos. The family ties have been cut, and the only mentality that are left is one of materialism, which ultimately leaves Jesse as the winner and the hegemonic male successfully dominates every other aspect.

Wille further notes on the lack of childhood trauma with Jesse, unlike what is seen in Walter's past with his father. Where Walter has the cancer, and the imagery of his father that still haunts him, there is no apparent catalyst for Jesse to break bad. Wille thus argues that, although there is an apparent lack of motivation, Jesse is the oldest of two sons in the family where the parents have been favouriting their other traditional masculine son. Despite the younger brother being much younger, he is shown as both athletic and intelligent, something that makes Jesse feel insecure. Jesse is standing in his brother's room, looking at the various trophies for math and different sports. These traits speak to a more traditional masculinity, where Jesse appears as a contrast to his brother. Jesse did poorly in school, as affirmed numerous times by Walter, and Jesse would much rather spend his time drawing cartoons instead of following any sports. Because of the lack of hegemonic masculinity traits, the argument that Wille is presenting is thus that Jesse needs to follow the world of drugs in order to feed his male ego making up for what he has been lacking (Wille, 2014). Jesse later on uses his power obtained through the drug business to prove himself as a successful hegemonic man. This is seen as Jesse earns enough money to buy his parent's house, as a way to declare himself independent from his parents. With this, Jesse turns his back completely on his parents, and as Brian Faucette concludes, Jesse turns to Walter as a surrogate father, which is yet another thing Walter comes to see as a way to control Jesse.

### Walter and Jesse

Johnston argues that most of what Walter is doing, he is doing purely in accord with his own self-interest. The only glimpse of true selflessness, or however close Walter comes to a capability of getting to selflessness, is not seen in his children, but towards Jesse as argued by critic Eric San Juan (2013). San Juan discusses how the weakness and the desperate need Jesse has for a father figure is constantly adding fuel the flame that is the relationship between Jesse and Walter. Walter is in desperate need of feeding his ego and having control, and with Jesse who has the need for an authority, Walter uses Jesse's sensitivity to manipulate and control him (San Juan, 2013). This is to

which San Juan states, that when talking about selflessness, Walter is not acting out of benevolence, but tending to his own egotistical needs. In the midst of the manipulation and psychological abuse, San Juan argues that there is a sense of tenderness that is not seen towards Walt Jr. We argue that this can be seen in the newfound world of violence Walter fits so comfortably in. In this world, Walter is able to use his newly acquired traits, such as a lack of empathy and inclination to violence, in a way other people can appreciate. The only way his behaviour can be seen as altruistic is because his paternal doings are pointed towards Jesse, who is a part of the same world (San Juan, 2013). Adding on this idea of San Juan's, we argue that having a father figure with an equal mindset means that Jesse is now able to gain a sense of fatherly praise. As his biological father praised his brother, and his sporty and scholarly achievements, Jesse now has a father figure who he can impress with the skillset and interest he has of the world of drugs. It is in this world, San Juan argues that acts such as Walter confronting the drug lord Gustavo Fring over Jesse, killing the two thugs to save Jesse, also being Walter's first cold blooded killings. These scenarios are seen in the final moment when Walter takes a bullet for Jesse, as he unleashes a valley of bullets upon Jack's group of neo Nazis that holds Jesse hostage (San Juan, 2013). Whether or not these scenarios can or should be interpreted as sincerity or altruism is up for debate, however, what is clearly depicted is how these instances are filled with more affection than he ever shows anyone else in the show. Nor is it clear what the motivation is for the protectiveness towards especially Jesse, or what about him that lets Walter contradict his Heisenberg side, as San Juan argued. He further notes that none of these scenarios are pure. Behind all of the actions, there have been something to gain from it for Walter. Either the situation has had something that benefitted Walter in the given moment, or the benefit of the action would further enable Walter to manipulate Jesse. These characteristics of Jesse, that allows him to be manipulated by Walter, is also the reason why Walter needs him so badly. This is depicted in the killing of Gale. Gale seems like the perfect partner for Walter, with similar interests and knowledge of the chemistry. However, as San Juan states, Walter is not in need of a partner with the same capabilities, he is in need of a partner that will do his bidding without questioning and that can help him achieve his personal goals.

As established, it is clear that Jesse and Walter have a toxic relationship in which Jesse serves as nothing but a tool to better Walter. However, in a discussion between actors Bryan Cranston and Aaron Paul who play Walter and Jesse on the show, they touch upon the dysfunctional relationship between the two and how it can be seen that Walter cared for Jesse, saying:

“Walt’s unplanned self-sacrifice in shielding Jesse from the bullet not only exposed what humanity was left in Walter White, but underlined the significance of their relationship, no matter how fractured. ‘[When] he hears that the blue meth is still out there, that Jesse is still cooking, it’s like, ‘That bastard! He convinced them to be a partner with him, he’s still cooking! I’ll kill everybody!’ says Cranston. ‘And then when I see him, the shred of humanity left in Walter White is exposed at that moment and he acts. So, if there’s any redeeming quality to him from the standpoint of the audience, it’s that moment. He even allows Jesse to kill him. Jesse has the gun and he points at me, and he says, ‘You want this?’ And I go, ‘Yeah. I think it’s fitting. Go ahead. You need to do it, go ahead. It’s okay.’ And then he says, ‘If you want this, then do it yourself. I’m not going to do it for you.’” (Snierston, 2013).

After everything Walter has done to Jesse, letting his girlfriend die, poisoning the son of the next girlfriend, being some of the key moments to this, Jesse still needs to be controlled by someone, and the only person he has is Walter. In this last scene quoted above, Jesse no longer wants to be controlled by Walter. Everything until this point, has happened to Walter’s desires but Jesse will not grant Walter the satisfaction of a quick death. It can be argued, how this scene shows Walter giving Jesse the opportunity to have closure by letting Jesse killing him. Whether it is paternal love, or simply Walter once again trying to manipulate Jesse into getting what he wants is unclear. However, going off the assumption Walter wants to redeem himself, first by covering Jesse and getting shot for it, and then by letting Jesse shoot him, it is quintessential that Walter puts this much effort into redeem himself to Jesse, instead of his family. By redeeming himself with Jesse, he is redeeming himself to his empire and his legacy. A few times throughout the show these short bursts of regret of the road he has chosen are seen, which is reflected in this last scene as well. It comes out as a burst of critiquing the neoliberal ideals, as if he has moments of clarity where he can see the harm it is doing. Another crucial scene supporting these outbursts is in the episode “Fly” which approximately aired two thirds into the show. The episode is simply about Walter and Jesse being in Gus’ laboratory trying to catch a fly throughout the entirety of the episode. Jesse questions Walter’s obsession with catching the fly, making remarks to whether or not Walter has hit his head to explain his crazy obsession with catching it. However, there is a deeper meaning behind the fly and there are many different interpretations on this episode. We argue that this fly stands for their toxic relationship and the neoliberal obsession of Walter especially. The toxicity is seen through the constant verbal abuse between the two that leads to nothing productive, and it is only when Jesse is left alone that the fly is eventually killed. This is a reflection of their relationship throughout the entirety of the show. Since the two of them have worked together the only outcome has been death and suffering, with more to come, and the only way the situation would change is if they were apart.

Jesse sees that the fly is a manifestation of something else to Walter which is seen in Jesse's monologue where he talks about his aunt and how she dealt with cancer, and how she was happier on the medication, living a peaceful life until the end. What becomes evident in Walter's monologue is the regrets Walter has about the path he has taken, and the fly is a manifestation of neoliberalism:

“There was some perfect moment and it passed me right by. I had to have enough to leave them. That was the whole point. I mean, none of this None of this makes any sense if I didn't have enough. But it had to be before she found out. Skyler. It had to be before that. ( ... ) I'm saying I've lived too long. I mean you want them to actually miss you, you know? You want their memories of you to be. But she just won't She just won't understand.” (Breaking Bad, “Fly”).

This is a moment where Walter realises what he has become, and it is the last time he shows care for his or anyone else's life. He realises how his imperial desires has consumed him, and how he has crossed the line for being a good father, provider, or husband. He states how you want people to miss you when you are gone, showing self-reflection of his own obsession. Walter repeatedly calls the fly a contamination in their operation, but it is really a metaphor for how Walter has been contaminated and is contaminating his surroundings. Walter's obsession with finding the contamination, or fly, is his final attempt to fix whatever broke inside him and his corporation. Walter's life has been contaminated with neoliberal ideas, and he is no longer able to disregard his unquenching thirst to prove himself and realise his full potential no matter the cost. He is frantically waving around, chasing it, and obsession about it, but he never catches it. Eventually, Walter expresses his regrets and shows remorse but falls out of conscience before the contamination is eliminated. In the act of chasing it, he has disregarded everything else, and the only person by his side is Jesse, no matter the abuse.

In order to further support the idea, that Jesse is the only person Walter truly show some paternal feelings towards, Wille (2014) notes on the difference between the parting scenes between Walter's biological son and the scene between Walter and Jesse. Where Walter only gives Walter Jr. a goodbye from afar, without Walter Jr. even knowing it. In contrast, Walter has a longer scene with Jesse, where he says his goodbyes. This shows, how Walter has disregarded his familiar values a long time ago to the benefit of his empire. With Jesse being such a big part of the business, by feeling a deeper emotional connection with him, it can be seen as he is actually parting with the empire. The neoliberal idea is tied to Walter's masculinity it can be argued that this parting is especially painful for him, as he has to let go of potential growth. Ultimately, it can be argued that

Walter taking a liking to Jesse can be seen in Walter's desperate desire to prove his worth. As stated by R.J Mitte, the actor behind Walter Jr.: "Jesse is his surrogate son, and he is using Jesse for his will. And I think out of that comes more love, in a sick and twisted kind of way" (Watkins, 2013). As the relationship between Walter and Jesse is a means for Walter to achieve his goals, there is occurring some sort of fatherly love. As with the relationship between Jesse and his biological father, he could not impress him because they were from separate social worlds. Jesse becomes more important to Walter because he is a part of becoming the drug kingpin he desires, whereas everyone else wants Walter out of the business. There are different takes on how the relationship between Jesse and Walter can be interpreted. As an effect of absent fathers, as seen in the post war fatherhood ideal linked to hegemonic masculinity, they each can be seen filling in the gaps in their respective lives. This is supported by Johnston, as she partially disagrees with the view of San Juan, as previously mentioned, when he states that Walter shows genuine emotion towards Jesse. Johnston argues, that their emotional bond makes sense from the perspective of Jesse, regarding genuine care for one another, however, she argues that the relationship is one-sided. The relationship is abusive, but Jesse has found a father figure that is pushing him to be better in his career. Despite Walter's manipulating ways, Jesse now has a father figure that wants him to pursue what his biological father and mother shunned him for doing. This shows how there is a semiotic relationship between Walter and Jesse that benefits both of their visions. This is seen as Walter finds a son that he can tutor in an area he excels at, and Jesse finds a mentor that shares the same interests as him. Lastly, Johnston argues that if there is a sense of fatherly emotions towards Jesse, then it is due to what Jesse is reflecting in Walter, namely the power, money, and influence that Jesse enables. Even as Walter pushes Jesse to go into rehab, after the death of his girlfriend, who Walter let die, Walter is not doing it to take care of Jesse as a person or son, but merely taking care of him, as one would an asset (Johnston, 2015). We this argue that this ties into the neoliberal idea that labour is not perceived as an abstract commodity purchased on the market, but as a human capital that is connected to the individual worker. Therefore, the reason why Walter appears fond of Jesse as one would an asset, is because Walter sees Jesse as labour and because Jesse, as an asset, enables a progression in Walter's objective to regain power from his corporation.

### The Nuclear Father

Finally, the relationship primarily between Walter and his son Walt Jr., but also taking the little proportion that is seen between Walter and his infant daughter. In the abovementioned section, it is

clear how Walter did not have the same compassion for his own children as he did for his business partner and surrogate son, Jesse.

The Italian psychoanalyst Luigi Zoja (2001) states how, ever since the second world war, the ideal patriarch of the family as well as the self-image of the man is based almost entirely based on the person's financial transactions as well as decisions (Zoja, 2001). It is therefore understood that the breadwinner father spends little to no time with the children with no sense of guilt connected to the lack of connection. In contrast, the focus lies on the economy, and a sense of guilt is more likely to occur if the patriarch loses an opportunity for economic gain, even if the loss is out of the control of the father. Professor Elizabeth Podnieks argues how this view of the breadwinner is depicted in Walter throughout the series. Moreover, she notes, that the assessment done by Zoja, makes it seem like Walter had been written as a direct depiction of the image of post war male and father figure. Because of how deeply connected the man's business life is connected to the male identity, this has an obvious effect of the relationship with his children. Because the white woman left the home, and a crisis appeared it was crucial for men to re-create the male identity. The re-creation has thus happened through their professional lives, which is why the male identity is so closely bound to their individual professional achievements. Furthermore, this works as an explanation of why Walter builds a stronger connection to Jesse rather than his biological children. Jesse is a part of his business life, and therefore also becomes a bigger part of his identity.

Walter's materialistic views are seen after the birth of his daughter Holly: "Want to see what your daddy did for you? That's right: Daddy did that. Daddy did that for you." (Breaking bad, "Phoenix") These are the lines that Walter speaks to his infant daughter as he shows some of the money that he has accumulated from his drug business. With this, Podnieks argues that Walter is in desperate need of asserting himself as the breadwinner. As he cannot do so in a regular fashion, due to the situation of his family still not knowing at this point in the show, he shows the money to his infant daughter, Holly (Podnieks, 2016). Wille explains the irony in showing his daughter the \$1.2million dollars that has been stacked and packed into the walls, what he is doing for her and Walter Jr., the day after Walter missed the birth of his daughter because he was absent while working for Gus. An example Podnieks notes as one of the "most vivid illustrations of Walter's misplaced priorities as a man, father, and husband" (Podnieks, 2016). However, Walter rarely shares screen time with Holly, and when he does, Walter seldom shows the characteristics of a loving and considerate father. Instead, Walter is the father who mistakenly calls his biological son for the name of his business partner, after having lied about forgetting his son's birthday, and

kidnaps his daughter at the threat of having her taken away, and thus his authority questioned. Walter still needs the affirmation from his family, as seen in the purchase of an expensive sports car, paid in full, for his son, a move which Podnieks calls nothing more than a means of integrating himself with his son, as a way to portray his objective success (Podnieks, 2016). The purchase of the Mustang is nothing but a way for Walter to display his wealth; a key factor in displaying his position of power in terms of neoliberalism and masculinity. However, what Walter failed to realise is, that his son is not in need of a fancy car, but an emotional bond with his father, and such a bond cannot be bought with money.

### It Can't All Be For Nothing

As Walter desperately tries to convince his family to accept his ill-gotten gains, he phones Walt Jr. wanting him to accept \$100,000 dollars, because it was all that could be fitted into a regular mailbox. Walter states that he wanted to give so much more, but Walter Jr. ends up blurting out “just die already” to which Walter responds, desperately begging “it can't all be for nothing”. This is Walter's final attempt at reconciliation with his family and fulfil the original goal of providing for them. Through the isolation he is put in, Walter might have realised his selfish behavior, and therefore tries to return to what he originally held dear – his family. However, what Walter Jr.'s reaction shows is that Walter too late realised what he has become. The neoliberal model as seen in the portrayal of the post war patriarch, is seen how toxic and damaging it can be in *Breaking Bad*. It is seen how short-lived this family model is in how many times Walter's priorities are tearing the family apart instead of bringing it together, with Walter being literally evicted from his house several times and in the end is not allowed close to his family. Podnieks, states how Walter here presents him as the self-sacrificing man he might believe himself to be. A man that is willing to put himself through all the hardship for the betterment of his family. However, as Podnieks argues that:

“Self-sacrifice is conditional upon the acceptance of Walter's blood money by one or more of his family members – a gesture that would affirm Walter's role as a breadwinner through the simultaneous moral acquiescence of Skyler and or Junior” (Podnieks, 2016).

Regarding hegemonic masculinity and the ideal man in a post war world, these assets Walter has accumulated would ultimately set his role as a provider and save his children from being impoverished. Podnieks further argues how this money thus becomes Walter's legacy. Both by becoming a successful self-made businessman, as well as establishing his worth as a successful and masculine father. The money in the show stands for the neoliberal fantasy and is associated with

power and masculinity, complimenting the self-made man that signifies the hardworking man. Regarding the neoliberal fantasy, the money has become a sign of measurement and status that ultimately serves as a statement to whether a man is a winner or a loser. Therefore, by Walter insisting that “it can’t all be for nothing” what he is really saying is not in regard to his children, and the financial insolvency of his wife and kids, but the fact that his image will collapse, thus it having more to do with the male ego as the patriarch of the white family (Podnieks, 2016).

What the show ultimately portrays regarding neoliberalism as a reconstruction of masculinity is how it fails to be a reliable force for a healthy household. The importance for Walter to assert himself as a real man, who is capable of providing for his family, and being seen as a successful businessman, drives the family apart. Instead of financially securing the family, Walter creates a divide in the family until the point where Hank and Marie takes the children into their care. With Skyler stating in the episode “Gliding Over All” that Walter makes more money than she is capable of laundering, she pleads: “I want my kids back. I want my life back. Please tell me. How much is enough? How big does this pile have to be?”, as she shows the pile of dirty money to Walter that is kept at a storage facility. Podnieks argues how this shows, that Walter’s patriarchal ego is the cause for the breakdown of the nuclear family. No amount of money would ever be enough, as his success was never related to his children and it is this desire to ratify himself as a breadwinner that is the cause of inability to fulfill the other expectations of the post-war father that is the aspect of a father and a role model (Podnieks, 2016). Skyler asks him “How much is enough?” but the reality is that Walter has no intention of ever stopping as he has to reach the top. He is finally realizing his full potential, something that he has never before felt throughout his life. He even gets cancer as a metaphor to start taking control of his life and regain his position as a dominant and powerful male. Peace was never an option. As seen in the earlier mentioned episode “Fly”, Walter is obsessed, and no matter what he claims he will never catch the fly, because there is no final goal, only more to be gained no matter how long he chases it.

### [The Real Father Figure of Breaking Bad](#)

In the beginning of the show, it becomes clear that the DEA brother in law, Hank, functions as the antithesis of Walter. Hank is this overly masculine man, shown through his casual racism and sexism, and his brute appearance of his square muscular frame and bald head, with everything reeking of testosterone. He is also the embodiment of the negative traits of masculinity that is a constantly around to show every aspect of masculinity that Walter is not. As the show moves on, the two characters follow each other in terms of evolvement of masculinity. Hank and Walter

follow a similar arch, and as Walter takes on a hyper-masculine role of Heisenberg, a decline and an insurgency with the hegemonic masculinity is seen in Hank. With the two characters following each other in their separate developments, the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity is further shown in the two character. As the hierarchy is about the domination of the other men, the development of Heisenberg is the downfall of Hank. Hank, being DEA, is part of a state funded organization. Neoliberalism values a free market with as little interference from the state as possible. When Walter begins to rise in terms of masculinity and power, Hank begins to fall. Another way of seeing this is that the rise of Walter's free-market empire forces the state into submission. One of the instances where the battle for authority can be seen is in the episode "Seven-Thirty-Seven", when Walter insists on serving Walter Jr. several shots of tequila as a celebration of Walter's cancer being in remission:

HANK: What you doing there?

WALTER: What does it look like I'm doing?

HANK: The kid's 16. You going for Father of the Year?

WALT: [to Walt Jr.] What are you looking at him for? We're celebrating. ...

HANK: I'd take a pass on that one if I were you, okay? Think we've been bogarting this puppy long enough.

WALT: Hey, bring. The bottle. Back.

HANK: Sorry, buddy. No can do.

WALT: My son! My bottle! My house! (Breaking bad, 2008; "Over").

In this scene, Johnston argues how it can be seen that Walter is establishing his hegemonic masculinity custodially. He does not care about that the alcohol potentially could harm his son. Instead he focuses on showing Hank that he is in control of his son. With Hank being an officer of the law, this scene goes deeper by having Walter showing the risk he is willing to take by sticking it to face of the system by illegally pouring alcohol to his minor son. Furthermore, as Hank being a product of the government, Walter's neoliberal agenda takes control and establishes dominance over the state by these actions. Podnieks calls this scene one of the many instalments of the battle for authority between Hank and Walter that in this case happens on behalf of Walter Jr. as he drunkenly vomits in the pool. Johnston argues how despite the machismo Hank feels the need to display in front of his brute and brawly colleagues of DEA agents, he shows that he is self-aware of the toxic traits he is portraying, but despite the portrayal of masculinity he puts up, there is a far greater essence of a role model and a loving father than seen in Walter. Hank is showing a genuine sense of care for both his wife, Marie as well as his nephew, Walter Jr., which marks the distinction

between Walter's narcissistic and destructive pride. Johnston further states that what Hank is portraying in this instance is what should be perceived as a proper sphere for masculinity, but instead it is overtaken by a diffident man snarling with possessiveness over his son (Johnston, 2015). In this situation Hank symbolises the proper sphere where Walter is blowing it out of proportion because he wants to display his superiority in a power display between Hank and Walter.

Once again, comparing the two father figures Johnston notes an instance where they are contrasting each other, thus showing their separate true motifs. The difference between Hank and Walter is seen by how Walter abandons the birth of his daughter due to his work. Meanwhile, when Hank gets a phone call from the hospital, stating that his wife Marie has been in an accident, Hank immediately abandons the chase for Jesse. Hank has been seen going to great lengths to catch Jesse, showing a near obsession with him, however, fearing for Marie's life, Hank does not hesitate about what he must do – which is to tend to his family in need. In the episode "Sunset" Hank shows that his family is worth giving up a promotion and harming his career, which goes against Walter's persona and the neoliberal ideal where the career is above everything. Despite the fact how much Walter might feel he is sacrificing for the good of the family, the audience is never met with acts of compassion as those seen from Hank. Here it comes to show how there are relative perceptions of what is a strength and what is a weakness. Regarding the custodial values, Hank's compassion is seen as a strength as he is able of bonding and taking care of his family emotionally. From a masculinity and neoliberal standpoint however, Hank's compassion comes to show as a weakness as it can be used against him. As a strength it is simply easier to achieve goals when one has a total disregard of human life or emotion. Even though Walter states early on in a video how Skyler is the love of his life, he is constantly choosing to feed his ego through his alternative life rather than actually tending to his family, even if that alternative life puts his loved ones at risk (Johnston, 2015). Walter has no true compassion for his loved ones, and he is using this custodial relationship Hank portrays to his advantage. This also shows that the contrast that was shown in the beginning of the show, where the first impression of Hank is an embodiment of the toxic masculinity traits. However, as it is learned, Hank is truly nurturing and caring, and even aware of the characteristics he puts on, such as trying to hide his emotions, thus being aware of the toxic traits of hegemonic masculinity that he feels upon himself, but do not know how to deal with.

In the beginning of the show, the audience is met with a Walter that is the example of the male angst of the time, where the pressure of hegemonic masculinity drives Walter to extreme measures. Hank is seen as the casually racist, homophobic brute that becomes the voice of reason

and an image of self-reflection of how this form of masculinity is non-sustainable. Encapsulated, we argue how it can be said that where Walter submits to the norms of society, Hank is broken by the same norms of hegemonic masculinity. As Hank no longer can internalize his feelings of what he has undergone. Hegemonic masculinity dictates that a man should be strong, also emotionally, and this becomes too much for Hank, stating that despite his appearance and how he is being perceived in the beginning of the show, he cannot fulfil the unrealistic expectations of society. Equal to the perception Hank make for himself, Walter has his alter ego, Heisenberg, which allows his to fully submit to the ideals of the ways of neoliberalism. Furthermore, this can be seen reflected in the relationship between Walter Jr. and Hank. Johnston discusses how Hank and Walter share some of the same characteristics, with their longing for the norm, which is seen when Hank lies about Walt Jr.'s disability, saying that he broke his leg playing football – an incident, that would only make Walt Jr. look more masculine. This resembles Walter tearing up Walter Jr's. disability parking permit, however, where Hank lies on behalf of Walter Jr., he is doing it to protect Walter Jr.'s pride rather than his own unlike Walter who does it to protect his own pride (Johnston, 2015). With the absence of Walter in his son's life, Walter Jr. comes to see Hank as a surrogate father, much like how Jesse perceives Walter. Guffey and Koontz (2014) argue how the reasoning behind Walt Jr. taking in Hank as a surrogate is due to the amount of compassion that lies behind the rough outer shell. These fatherly characteristics of Hank is further what makes Walter Jr., see him as a reliability, as seen when he calls for Hank after being busted for trying to buy alcohol. Here, Hank rebukes the act and asks Walter Jr. how he think Walter would think about him consolidating to him rather than his biological father. By doing so, Hank is not only showing his sensitive side towards Walter Jr., but also fighting to maintain the pride of Walter, as argued by Guffey and Koontz. It is these characteristics of a man Walter Jr. seeks in a father figure and role model which makes him chose Hank over Walter in times of need. With Walter Jr. even rebuking the assets Walter has accumulated for him, he ultimately shows that what he needs is not the financial support, it is the emotional support of a father. Walter Jr is explicitly showing what kind of father figure he wants. With the father figure in relation to Walter's professional life the father does not need to have a personal bond with his children, yet Walt Jr. is showing that he values this bond higher than anything else. He does not care about the hierarchical structure of masculinity or neoliberalism, he only cares about the values a father brings to the family and the father actually being there. This is, however, what is being stripped away through the hegemonic masculinity. By men being in constant need of asserting themselves as tough, there is no room for emotions. The sphere of

hegemonic masculinity is seen in Hank's work environment, as he is struggling with PTSD. After beating up Jesse Pinkman, Hank speaks out about his feelings towards his wife, Marie:

"I'm supposed to be better than that... I've been—unraveling, y'know? I don't sleep at night anymore. I freeze, I freeze up. My chest gets all tight, I can't breathe. Just—I panic... What I did to Pinkman—that's not who I'm supposed to be. All this, everything that's happened, I swear to God, Marie, I think the universe is trying to tell me something and I'm finally ready to listen. I'm just not the man I thought I was. I think I'm done as a cop" (Breaking Bad, "One minute").

Regarding Hank's development, Hudson argues in an article in *Wired*, how Hank by these instances, with the abovementioned just being one example, how Hank is seen struggling with the toxic traits of masculinity. The cop world is dominated by men keeping each other down forcing them to isolate them and hide their emotions by a wall of jokes due to the cultural dogma (Hudson, 2013). This is the masculinity and dogma he is enrolled in that becomes gradually evident to Hank after his PTSD. Lyons state that the show never really displays fathers, but instead the show relies on the cousins, uncles, and brothers (Lyons, 2012). Because the actual fathers that are seen in the show are emotional or physically absent, the children are seeking emotional support through different channels. With the fathers feeling a need to keep an appearance of the perfect provider they are ironically pushing themselves further away from the sought fatherly characteristics in a modern world only to feed the egos of a different time, thus encapsulating the toxicity of patriarchal and hegemonic masculinity that is being portrayed in popular culture.

### [The Nuances of the Crisis in Masculinity](#)

To examine the nuances of the crisis in masculinity, it is necessary to include different texts to understand how masculinity functions in more ways than what has previously been explored. Masculinity is a complex concept and the crisis men are experiencing is presented in various ways in popular culture. This section will demonstrate the nuances of the masculinity crisis that is present in modern television. While *Breaking Bad* reconstructs masculinity in a critical manner through neoliberalism, the *Deadpool* films approach it differently. However, the two texts are interfering with the same social practices as they both address the complexity in reconstructing masculinity, and because they both utilise a patriarchal hierarchy to enforce masculinity. To examine how *Deadpool* deals with the crisis in masculinity, a meta-analysis will focus on both the character Deadpool and the actor, Ryan Reynolds.

The crisis of masculinity in *Deadpool* becomes apparent when looking at how Deadpool frames his masculinity. Throughout the two films, Deadpool, or Wade Wilson, is often seen adopting female attributes, such as using a strap-on dildo on himself, dancing ballet, showing emotions, and singing karaoke (Deadpool, 2016). For that reason, many critics argue that *Deadpool* is disrupting the norms of hegemonic masculinity, and the character is often praised for being brave enough to encode femininity into his identity (Rada, 2018). However, Deadpool is also enforcing a hegemonic form of masculinity, such as patronising traditional superhero characters, by making fun of his insecurities, and by shoving his penis in other people's faces, the literal sense of the metaphoric phallic measurement that is often compared in competing males as seen in the *Deadpool* films. An example of this can be found in the two-minute ad for *Deadpool 2* in which Deadpool overcomes Cable, a man bred from war and who is more machine than man, by reducing him to a children's toys and shoving his penis into Cable's face (20<sup>th</sup> Century Studios, 2018). The actor, Ryan Reynolds, also plays a big role in the portrayal of masculinity in the films. From a fourth-wall perspective, Ryan Reynolds was named the sexiest man alive by US magazine 'People' (People, 2010), and his filmography is filled with mediocre movies and television shows with the most popular being the 90's TV-series "Two Guys, a Girl, and a Pizza Place" ("Ryan Reynolds – IMDB", 2020). In 2010 Ryan Reynolds was given the opportunity to star in the movie *Green Lantern*, a character from the DC-comics universe. However, the movie was poorly received and heavily critiqued because of its "smirky acting, clunky writing, and clueless direction" and was rated at 5,5/10 on IMDB (Travers, 2011). In terms of free-market and 'winner-takes-all ethos', it is easy to imagine that the backlash Ryan Reynolds received from starring in the movie *Green Lantern* functioned as a catalyst for him to regain his position as the sexiest man alive and his integrity as an actor. Ryan Reynolds also retain his position as a dominant male as he was previously married to Scarlet Johansson and he is currently married to Blake Lively. Both women are well known for being credited as some of the sexiest movie stars in Hollywood with multiple websites dedicated to idolise their beauty. Acquiring women that are objectified in that way also functions similarly to displaying wealth in neoliberalism as they function as a sign of what he is able to achieve. With that in mind, Ryan Reynolds has established his position on the male hierarchy, and the feminine attributes that he embodies in *Deadpool* are merely another way for him to re-establish his masculinity. From a neoliberal perspective, the *Deadpool* movies were the highest grossing R-rated movies until 2019 ("List of highest grossing R-rated films", 2020), and while the story does not focus on free-market or capitalism explicitly, it still reinforces the notion

that masculinity can be framed through neoliberalism. The popularity, success, and wealth that Ryan Reynolds accumulated from the films and the popular gin company he bought, has impacted both the public opinion of him as well as his position on the hierarchy of masculinity. Ryan Reynolds is also able to take advantage of the masculinity through his character when he adopts the sarcastic persona of Deadpool during interviews or commercials. Deadpool and Ryan Reynolds are so closely tied together in the public sphere, it is easy for Ryan Reynolds to adopt the established masculinity of his film character. In doing so, he commodifies himself in an attempt to stay relevant as he would otherwise be disposable labour. Ryan Reynolds actively engages this notion when he mirrors the persona of Deadpool during interviews, or when he posts *Deadpool* ads or cinematics on his own Youtube and Twitter account. In that way, Ryan Reynolds is actively strengthening the association between himself and the character he plays, which allows him to both exhibit the patriarchal masculinity that he, as a person, has established, while maintaining the feminine attributes that *Deadpool* incorporates. By incorporating female traits into his persona as Deadpool, Ryan Reynolds is enforcing the idea that his patriarchal masculinity is so set in stone that his adaptation of positive feminine traits has no consequence to his identity as a male. In other words, *Deadpool* demonstrates that men must first establish themselves on the male hierarchy through traditional hegemonic traits before they achieve a position in which their masculinity is not damaged by incorporating feminine traits. In that way, *Deadpool* differs from *Breaking Bad* as Walter White seeks to establish his male identity through the neoliberal ideology while Wade Wilson reinforces his masculinity through the use of feminine traits. In other words, he utilises the current positive societal idea of men and incorporates those traits into his persona to cover up how deeply linked his masculinity is to the hegemonic form. This also addresses the crisis in masculinity in which men must reconstruct lost masculinity, but *Deadpool* produce a discourse in which positive traits alone are too fragile to be the foundation of a healthy male identity. Furthermore, Deadpool shuns capitalism and the male hierarchy throughout the film by refusing to be part of a superhero franchise, and he utilises a fourth wall breaking to make the audience reflect on these values in contemporary society. However, the films contradict this statement as Deadpool eventually falls into the same categories as he ridiculed when he teams up with the X-Men and assume the role of a superhero character to save the girl. In doing so, Deadpool fails to live up to his own standards and he ends up reinforcing the same system that he pokes fun at. The *Deadpool* films recognise the problem in masculinity but address it by exemplifying how men must first establish themselves as hegemonic and have asserted themselves on the patriarchal hierarchy before they can

incorporate the positive and feminine traits, such as caring, emotions, and family, that society pushes men to be. With this in mind, the crucial similarity between *Breaking Bad* and *Deadpool* is that they both present a crisis in masculinity that needs to be addressed. However, while *Breaking Bad* reconstruct masculinity through neoliberalism and demonstrates how toxic this is to the societal expectations of family men, *Deadpool* engages a discourse where men can incorporate desired feminine traits, as long as they establish themselves as patriarchs of the masculinity hierarchy beforehand. *Breaking Bad* also offers a critique of its own representation of masculinity as it presents how damaging the crisis of masculinity is to both the individual but also the familial representation of men. *Deadpool* does not offer the same in-depth understanding of masculinity, and the films attempt to hide this problem by covering it up with jokes, women, and cultural references.

#### Chapter 4: The Cultural Influence of Films and TV-Series

While the previous chapters discuss the principles of neoliberalism and masculinity and how these function in *Breaking Bad* and *Deadpool*, this chapter will argue that TV and film, as cultural artefacts, may have a societal and cultural influence on viewers. John Fiske (1984) argues that popular TV programmes are trending because the audience can express and make sense of the discourses of the text and the discourses that are employed in their social experiences. Whether or not *Breaking Bad* and *Deadpool* enforce neoliberal tendencies in masculinity or if they provoke an opposite response, an audience reflects on the texts while watching them. Television, as scholars remind us, is quintessentially the medium of popular culture and as such, its popular programming can provide an important window into the cultural dynamics at play for a given society (McKeown et al., 2015).

According to a study by Capelos & Graber (2009), exposure to TV-dramas leads to acquisition of political insights and practical information which affects viewers' discussion patterns. Additionally, the study demonstrates that the content of the shows informs viewers' political realities in other countries, which suggests that TV-dramas must be considered an alternative source for explaining how members of society enhance their understanding of the political world how they formulate their opinions, and how they perform their civic tasks. The study focused on the types of information citizens acquire by watching TV-dramas and the degree to which this information affects their understanding of politics (Capelos & Graber, 2009). Much of the learning occurs unintentionally when watching TV-dramas because the storyline is embedded in situations that

closely resemble the current political environment and thus learning from TV-dramas has interesting qualities as they facilitate learning passively rather than actively because audio-visual story-telling techniques are often unnoticed. Furthermore, as episodes of TV-series reach millions of viewers around the globe and because the material is easily digestible because of compatibility with viewers' taste, the learning is effortless. However, this also means that viewers are selectively avoiding information they find disturbing or contradicting to their beliefs thus limiting their intake of information (Capelos & Graber, 2009). Yet, this proves to be beneficial to the idea that viewers selectively choose to watch *Breaking Bad* and *Deadpool* because they recognise or accept the political beliefs they are exposed to in that specific TV-drama or film thus opening themselves up to even more political influence. Learning is also enhanced with the interpersonal communication as events from the shows are often discussed in conversations with friends or in the news and because viewers develop a relation to the characters and understand their situation or the events that occur on a deeper level. For example, according to Tokosumi (1999), viewers often experience the same or similar emotions as the fictional characters in the show. The study by Capelos & Graber (2009) found that viewers acquire significant information from the content of the shows they watch which then informs their views about politics and allow them to draw parallels between their own and other political realities, even if most viewers acquire this information without fully realising it. The significance of this study is important as it demonstrates alternative routes to political learning and the importance of entertainment offerings in modern TV. However, this study is also important for public policies. Public organisations and governments can use TV-dramas to educate viewers about political issues because people learn from entertainment shows. TV-dramas can effectively trigger learning and political discussions about particular issues and the power of popular entertainment is shaping the way people see and experience the political world (Capelos & Graber, 2009).

Drawing on that, according to the dissertation by Matthew Ussia (2012), people of the post-Reagan and Thatcher administration live in a world where terror negatively influences common sense despite living in the halcyon days of their youth. Ussia argues that something in society has gone terribly wrong and that both popular culture and canonical literature has reinforced a certain system that enforces a terror which is rooted in the side-effects of an economic policy (Ussia, 2012). Students and consumers of popular culture are exposed to certain values and discourses that are read, re-read, and branded into their conscience. Ussia attempts to examine how private lives, how we see ourselves, and how we perceive our place in the world, has changed because of the economic policy of privatisation and neoliberalism (Ussia, 2012). *Breaking Bad* is an example of

the exposure to privatisation and neoliberal values as it continuously exposes the viewer to these core values and narrates characters of the show to constantly make decisions based on these ideals. For example, even after Walter White chooses to retire from his illegal activities because of his family's safety and his own, he is unable to put it behind him. He runs into a man at the hardware store who is filling his shopping cart with meth supplies in the episode "Over". Agitated by the competition, Walter White tells the man and his companion to stay out of his territory, marking that he is not yet finished with his illegal activities. Despite the logical solution that Walter White should leave his business behind while he is ahead and safe, he decides to return to a dangerous path that eventually leads to his demise because his professional life is now tied to his masculinity. The territorial dilemma is bound in Walter's ego as a self-made man because he perceives the market as his territory, and this scene in the TV-series illustrate how the neoliberal values that Walter adopts have fused with his identity, becoming one of the situations where he constructs his masculinity. Walter White is fully aware that this direction is inevitable, as he has already had multiple encounters with law enforcement and death, and even though he reaches his financial goal to secure his family from poverty, he cannot turn down the desire of empowerment and doing something that he is very talented at, no matter the consequences. Viewers are constantly exposed to actions and choices and it may be the certain values and discourses that Ussia (2012) is referring to when discussing what has gone wrong in popular culture. Drawing on the theoretical background of governmentality and Michel Foucault (1991), movies are guiding and shaping individuals with certain aims and objectives in mind (Burchell et al., 1991). Movies contribute to the reinvention of government, reconstitution of welfare, and the production of a self-sufficient citizenry for the audience.

With that in mind, it is safe to assume that the neoliberal policies and how it affects the crisis in masculinity in *Breaking Bad* and *Deadpool* does carry significance to the viewers and it is expected that viewers are influenced by the popular culture that they are exposed to. Moreover, if viewers are expected to be influenced by the political discourse present in a TV-series or movie, then producers, writers, and distributors must also carry that in mind when creating texts. After all, it is the viewers who are the primary consumers of the product. TV-series or movies such as *Breaking Bad* and *Deadpool* govern the mentality of viewers to fit the neoliberal values and discourse that they present. *Breaking Bad* presents a narrative that combines the imperative of the male to reclaim his position as a provider with a desire to embody the nature of independence offered by neoliberalism. Walter White represents an ideal of neoliberal masculinity that viewers

can relate to and the narrative of the show is ultimately designed to keep the patriarchal nuclear family intact at the cost of other groups while also maintaining a toxic relation to the neoliberal ideal of modern society. However, we argue that the nuclear family is merely a tool to display attributes such as being a provider and a breadwinner, which is absolute in terms of achieving a position of power in the male hierarchy. The economic-rational individualism of neoliberalism is fused with aggressive, hyper-masculine behaviour in *Breaking Bad*. Neoliberalism, with its prime concentration on promoting aggressive individualism and self-interest, does not leave much space for non-aggressive emotions, like compassion and humility, nor for socially directed actions such as charity, working for social and economic justice, and community building (Pierson, 2013). For that reason, *Breaking Bad* and *Deadpool* are just two cultural text in a sea of many that narrates a story about neoliberalism being a way to reconstruct masculinity. Yet, the reconstruction of masculinity is framed as toxic for both the individual and society as it excludes attributes from a new-man masculinity making it damaging for family values.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

The analysis of *Breaking Bad* and *Deadpool 1 & 2* examined how neoliberalism is used in popular culture to reconstruct masculinity in a crisis. The crisis origins from the diminishing borders between genders where women gained an increasing influence on the job market and men had to redefine themselves in the household. The neoliberal values and policies examined in the texts illustrate how men are able to restore masculinity through a winner-takes-all ethos and entrepreneurship in men's professional career that reinforces a patriarchal hierarchy. The texts critique the neoliberal reconstruction of masculinity, as it persuades men to abandon positive traits, such as being nurturing, being emotionally connected, and being a caretaker, which are previously associated with femininity. Instead, the texts present a form of masculinity that thrives on the hegemonic traits, such as dominance, violence, and the subjugation of other men, women, and minorities which leaves no room for familial values.

This thesis is relevant and applicable to the world because there has been a paradigm shift in masculinity and what it means to be masculine. Traditional male stereotypes that are often perceived as toxic for society are especially damaging to the male identity as it enforces negative norms that keep men from realising their potential and instead results in men giving up. Popular culture promotes a negative form of masculinity instead of creating a script for positive masculinity which is encapsulated by James O'Neil, a Ph.D. from the University of Connecticut:

“The traditionally male trait of "restrictive emotionality" also works against men's well-being. Many men haven't been given the tools to discuss their feelings in healthy ways. Men are experiencing the loss of [traditional male] stereotypes but they don't have the capacity to process the loss emotionally. Men don't know what to put in place of what they're giving up," (Weir, 2017).

Both *Deadpool* and *Breaking Bad* critique the restrictive emotionality of current masculinity and displays the lack of tools for men in the current male scripts which urges men to separate themselves from familial values and focus on entrepreneurship to regain masculinity. As depicted in the texts, popular culture presents how devastating the neoliberal ideology is to men's identity, and how it affects the male role in the household. Walter materialises masculinity that is reconstructed through neoliberalism and presents how this form of masculinity affects his previous core values of family as well as how it affects men on a societal scale. He embodies the hegemonic masculinity through violence, domination, and entrepreneurship. His constant need to fulfil the cultural expectations of masculinity is thus framed as a danger to his mental health, physical health, and social health. Meanwhile, Hank present an opposite reaction as he transforms from a traditional male to a modern embodiment of positive traits. Hank crumbles under the crisis in masculinity which eventually leaves him bedridden before he concedes to a more dominating form of masculinity. Furthermore, *Deadpool 1 & 2* present a script where patriarchal masculinity must be established in males before they can embrace the beforementioned positive attributes of masculinity. In that way, popular culture demonstrates how the crisis in masculinity can be partially solved by resorting to traditional masculinity to regain control and a position of power. Yet it also functions as a warning to both men and society that this type of masculinity is harmful to core familial values. The neoliberal reconstruction of masculinity is thus a way for males to measure themselves as men in a reaction to the male angst, and it neglects the possibility that men can reconstruct masculinity through positive feminine values.

The crisis in masculinity is evident in the extreme lengths men are willing to go to regain a sense of masculinity and in the current suicide rates of contemporary society. For that reason, the story of masculinity must undergo a societal change that does not associate masculinity with free market, entrepreneurship, and self-realisation that promotes a violent and competitive social practice for men in which they attempt to outperform each other similarly to the toxicity of neoliberalism and hegemonic masculinity. Instead, positive attributes of masculinity should be

promoted and reconstructed through family ideals so men can find a positive footing where they are not afraid to discuss their emotions and seek help.

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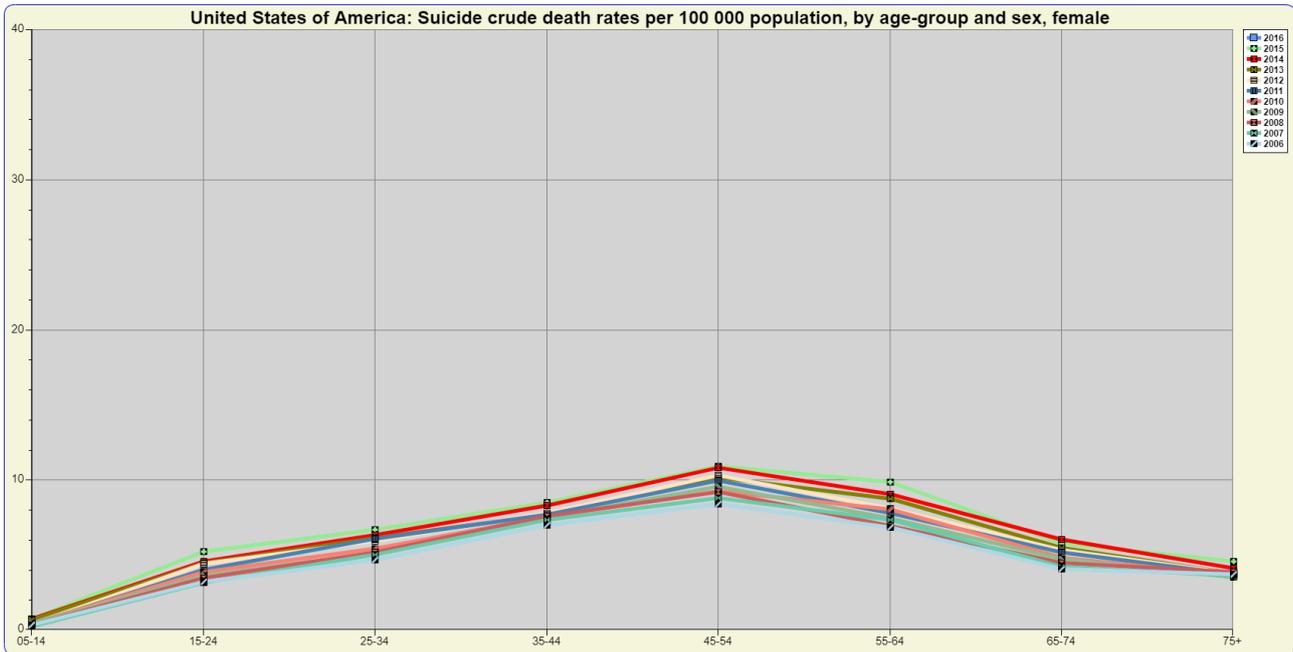
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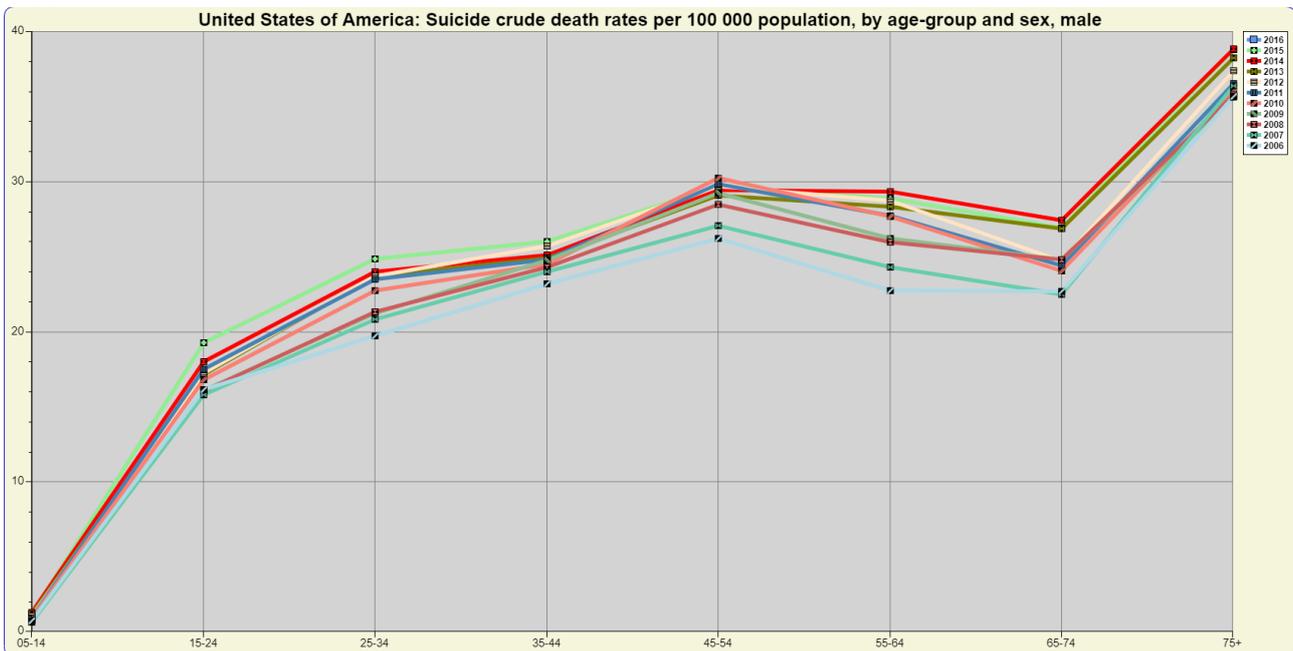
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## Appendix A – Suicide Death Rates in Females



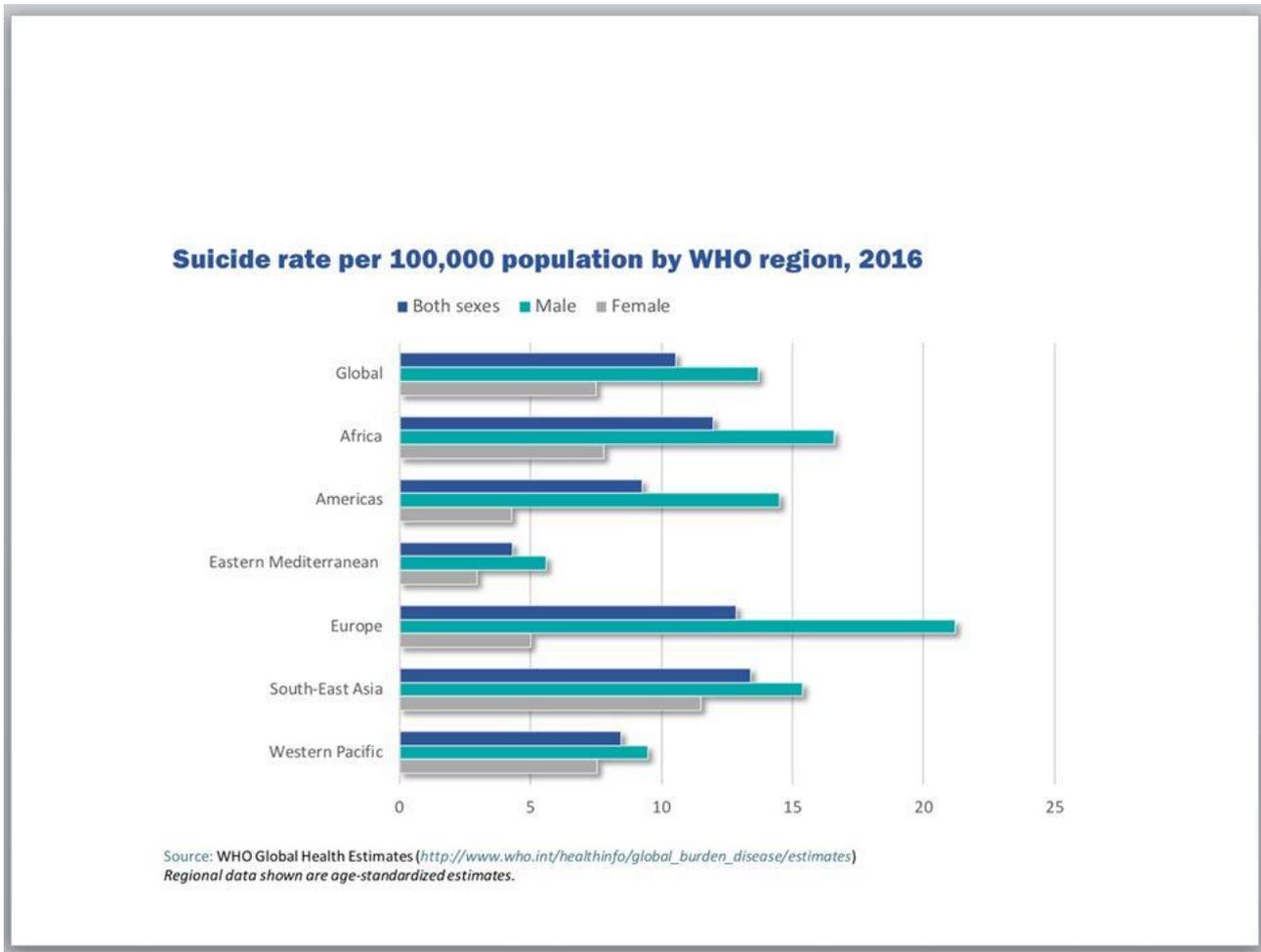
Source: (GHO, 2017; [https://apps.who.int/gho/data/view.main.MHSUICIDEREGv?lang=en.](https://apps.who.int/gho/data/view.main.MHSUICIDEREGv?lang=en))

## Appendix B – Suicide Death Rates in Males



Source: (GHO, 2017; [https://apps.who.int/gho/data/view.main.MHSUICIDEREGv?lang=en.](https://apps.who.int/gho/data/view.main.MHSUICIDEREGv?lang=en))

## Appendix C – Suicide in Males and Females by Region



Source: (GHO, 2017; <https://apps.who.int/gho/data/view.main.MHSUICIDEREGv?lang=en>.)