

A Matter of Values, Not Just Taste in Characters

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TV fans have been supporting their favorite characters for years, with an intensity and passion that launched a million comment threads. But whether you rooted for Buffy the vampire slayer to end up with Angel, the vampire with a soul, or with Spike, her nemesis turned lover, your preference was a matter of taste rather than morality. There's no right answer when fans debate which character on "The Wire" was cooler, the drug kingpin Stringer Bell or the outlaw Omar Little.

But what's made "Breaking Bad" different is that the show turned our natural inclination to support a character against us, and into a moment of moral reflection on our own values.

What was chilling wasn't just Walt's crimes, but that we're still far from a consensus on whether his actions were wrong.

Walter White started out with the narrative arc of a caped crusader: a schlub who discovered he had secret powers, in his case, being able to cook exceptionally pure meth, poison his enemies, and build bombs. At first, it was exciting to watch Walt break out of his humdrum existence. His displays of hyper-competence were so dazzling that we focused more on his skills than on how grievously he was misapplying them.

But "Breaking Bad" has been making it clear for years that Walter White is no hero. He let a young woman choke to death on her own vomit. He emotionally abused and sexually assaulted his wife, Skyler. He poisoned a child in a Rube Goldberg-like ploy for power. With all these moments, fans debated when Walt seemed to break bad.

But the show also provided many moments for fans to break good, register our disgust with Walt's actions, and renounce any sympathy we might have had for him.

"Breaking Bad" consistently raised two general moral questions of its viewers. Why do we value strength and competence so highly, even when they have terrible ends? Why are audiences so easy on men who transgress, if they do so in the name of masculine ideals, like providing for family?

Most of us will be fortunate enough never to have to deal with meth kingpins. But Walt's treatment of his wife and his one-time business partner Jesse Pinkman have sparked conversations with real-world applications about what constitutes marital rape, the fact that verbal abuse is still abuse, and our attitudes towards addicts and crime. What was chilling about Walt's bad acts wasn't simply the larger context of his criminal empire. It was that the show revealed that we're still far from a consensus on whether some of the things Walt did in the course of the show are wrong at all. The discussions that realization inspired are part of the show's broader legacy.

Sunday's "Breaking Bad" finale isn't likely to have eliminated the remaining fans who were still Team Walt. But the show has accomplished something special in turning our TV rooting interests from a matter of taste into a more weighty debate about what we value, and where we draw the line on screen as in life.