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New TV Narratives: Why Breaking Bad Matters

Todd Alcott · Tuesday, October 22nd, 2013

Breaking Bad has ended. Walt has settled his debts and rests in peace. Internet folk have deployed millions of pixels to dissect the show's meanings, all of which attention it richly deserves. However, after all this time, I haven't seen an article describing what the show has meant to me, and to writing for television, so I figured I'd better write it myself.

Young writers sometimes ask me what is the difference between "story" and "plot." My father described it to me this way: "*Rocky* is the story of a man who redeems himself. The plot is how he does that." There are very few stories to tell, but there are many many plots to deliver those stories. Walter White's story is exactly the same as Michael Corleone's, which is exactly the same as MacBeth's: a man commits a crime for the sake of his family, and in so doing, loses his family, and everything else. The "lesson" of the story is that there are no shortcuts in morality, that "breaking bad" for the sake of good is self-delusion and will lead to ruin. They are the same story, but with different plots.

And plot is why we watch. Anyone can come up with a good story. My children regularly come up with good stories. One will come into my office and say "Hey dad, here's an idea for a movie," and then proceed to tell me a story that would, indeed, make for a good movie. The next step, however, is giving that story a plot, and that's the hard part.

And plot is what TV drama demands. How will Piper Chapman deal with the newest complications of prison life? How will Tyrion Lannister negotiate his latest political conundrum? How will Dr. House figure out what's wrong with the patient? We know that they will, we watch to find out how. *Columbo* knew this, it told us right up front "whodunit," it knew that we were watching to find out how Columbo was going to catch whodunit.

TV writing is nothing without plot: an hour-long drama might have a half-dozen interweaving plot strands, and even the simplest 22-minute sitcom demands an "A-story" and a "B-story" with separate plots. That's a whole ton of plot in just one evening of televised entertainment. You can have great characters, and great actors playing those characters, and even great stories to tell, but without plot no one is watching. Plot is the engine that drives the shiny locomotive to its destination. A lot of people guessed correctly "what would happen" in the last episode of *Breaking Bad*, none of them guessed the plot.

To build a successful TV drama, you need a great premise, one that can give rise to many plots. "An impostor becomes the head of an ad agency in the turbulent 1960s" is a great premise. "Vampires become accepted members of society" is a great premise. "A man is married to three women" is a great premise. And in the best of shows, everything that happens on the show is an extension of that premise. On *Bewitched*, Darren Stevens marries a witch, who promises to "go straight" in order to fit in to post-war American middle-class suburban life. Everything that happens to Darren on *Bewitched* happens because of that premise. Now, *Bewitched* is a situation

comedy, so each episode wraps up its plot in its 22-minute allotted time, and each episode is interchangeable with any other episode. It's as though Darren gets out of bed newly-born every morning.

Now let's look at the show universally recognized as the greatest show in history. The premise of *The Sopranos* is "A gangster goes to therapy." That's a great premise for the show, but look at what happens: as the show goes on, the importance of Tony Soprano's therapy wanes, until his therapist isn't even featured on some episodes. The show became bigger than its premise. The same thing happened with *Mad Men*: the first-season premise, its "hook," "No One Can Find Out Who Don Draper Is," was largely spent by the end of the season and the show became about much bigger things.

And here is where *Breaking Bad* comes in.

Breaking Bad is the first show that I can think of, an hour-long drama, a continuous story, where everything that happens in the plot is an extension of the central premise. The central premise being: "A mild-mannered high-school chemistry teacher decides to go into the meth business in order to support his family after he's dead." And it sounds like an obvious thing to bring up, but no other hour-long drama at the time had accomplished it: an ongoing narrative, hour after hour, tons and tons of plot, flowing endlessly, from this one premise. Walter White makes this one decision, and sets into motion a series of events that eventually kills hundreds of people and affects the lives of hundreds more. Now that I think of it, Tony Soprano going into therapy is only one tiny thread of the *Sopranos* tapestry, I can only think of a handful of plot points that arise directly from that decision. But Walter White's decision to go into the meth business is the decision that not only changes his world, it changes the world of his family, his extended family, his community, the law-enforcement community, communities in other countries, and on and on.

The moment I became aware of this was at the end of Season 2, when (spoiler alert) it's revealed that the midair collision of two aircraft was the result of Walter White letting Jesse's girlfriend choke on her own vomit while overdosing. And I thought about that for a beat, wondered if the show was cheating, or at least stretching a little, and decided no, it wasn't. Because Walter White, two seasons earlier, had decided to go into the meth business, Jesse's girlfriend was now dead and her father, an air-traffic controller, was sufficiently traumatized by her death as to crash a plane, full of people, into another plane, in the skies over Albuquerque. The teddy-bear that lands in Walter's pool, the image that frames the whole season, is a direct result of his one decision.

I'd never seen a show do that before, and it struck me as a rare achievement. *Game of Thrones* has plot extending in curlicues in every direction, but no central premise, no key event that set all its plots into motion. *Mad Men* doesn't do it, *Hannibal* doesn't do it, *The Walking Dead* doesn't even do it ("zombie apocalypse" is a great premise, but it's more like a weather condition, it's not an act by a character). Since *Breaking Bad* came along, other shows are beginning to pick up the thread: *Homeland*, for instance, or the new *Blacklist*. But if you were to ask me what makes *Breaking Bad* a landmark, beyond its overall excellence, I'd say that it is its contribution to the art of television writing by way of a huge, intricate plot derived from a simple premise, rooted in character.

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