



ARCHETYPES OF TOXIC MASCULINITY AND RELUCTANT FEMINITY IN LIMINAL SITUATIONS. THE CONSTRUCTION OF PUBLIC ENEMIES IN THE WORLDS OF “WEDNESDAY” AND “BREAKING BAD”

Anamaria SASU

PHD, The Doctoral School of Communication, University of Bucharest
anamaria.parfeni@gmail.com

Abstract

This article, based on the findings of the Gemini project, explores the perception of gender and family in *Breaking Bad* and *Wednesday* through the lens of archetypes and liminal development. *Breaking Bad* discusses traditional family values as impacted by the challenges and overall conditions of modern society, offering examples of toxic masculinity, toxic relationships and the role of women within the family, while *Wednesday* is an upside-down image of reality, within an unconventional family, where discussions about individualism, parental expectations and gender nonconformity are the norm. Both shows showcase characters in liminal situations and use complex relationships to critique gender norms and the evolving concept of family, while engaging audiences with nuanced portrayals of social identity. This analysis explores the liminal worlds and archetypal references in these two serial dramas, with a focus on gender and family, in an attempt to discover their appeal to young audiences.

Keywords: Toxic masculinity; Gender archetypes; Liminality; Jungian archetypal analysis; Gender nonconformity; Family representation; Otherness and identity construction

Introduction

It is a long way from the sun-scorched deserts of Arizona to the gloomy, downcast halls of Nevermore Academy. Worlds apart, one may say. One world where drugs, money and ruthlessness are the norm, and the other, where regular teenage drama is set against a background of outcast rules and improbable issues. However, beneath their seemingly very different surfaces, both shows deal with the same theme: the profound exploration of identity in crisis, where their protagonists' journeys through various liminal states are used to navigate, dissect and critique the fundamental archetypes regarding gender and family, that underpin the values of modern Western society. In this respect, *Breaking Bad* explores the implosion of the patriarchate and dissolution of the traditional family, undermined by toxic masculinity and ego, turning Walter White into a veritable anti-hero (a descent into Otherness), while *Wednesday*, with its strong (and strangely traditional) family values, powerful feminine lead and general subversive plot, attempts to create a new independent feminine archetype, an ascent from Otherness to a new and unlikely type of hero.

The choice

The choice of the two serial dramas analysed stemmed from the findings of the Gemini project. In late 2023, the Romanian research team conducted 3 focus group sessions with 44 Romanian teenagers¹. Later, we had 306 responders to our survey trying to measure the influence of serial dramas on European young adults' perception of gender-related issues. Our aim was to discern any emerging patterns and learn how we could help them and their teachers even further, by using serial dramas to teach about gender issues.

¹ See focus group results in Hansen et al. 2024(1)

First of all, we expected to get a sizeable list of Romanian TV series to analyse and monitor. However, the responses received in the focus groups and in the subsequent online survey showed that Romanian teenagers did not watch Romanian TV series. According to the survey, Romanian teenagers, just like their Irish counterparts, tend to cite international or non-local serial dramas (Hansen et al, 2024(2): 52). The most popular names listed in our discussions were US titles, not necessarily age-appropriate, and, furthermore, titles that were not available on TV, but only on streaming platforms. Girls mentioned mostly titles with strong female leads, such as *Wednesday* or *Gilmore Girls*, or sitcoms (*Friends*, *Big Bang Theory*, etc.). Boys stated they watched mostly crime and action serial dramas, like *Breaking Bad*, *Game of Thrones* etc.

Local titles were rarely mentioned in focus groups and were mostly related to watching TV along with a family member. The survey further clarified this aspect, showing that some teenagers consider that local series refer to a societal model perceived as distant from their generation.

Two titles were, nevertheless, recurrently mentioned in all three focus groups: *Wednesday* and *Breaking Bad*, and the choice of these serial dramas for our analysis seemed obvious. We could easily find an explanation for the choice of *Wednesday*: it has a strong female lead, it is targeted at teenagers (a teenage character undergoing change, exploring family relationships, friendships, and romance), and part of the first season was filmed on location in Romania. Moreover, it has been promoted in Romania through heavy marketing (including localized marketing for its second season), showcasing local landmarks, promoting the local cast, and even using Romanian poetry².

Wednesday is a spin-off of the hugely successful Addams Family franchise, focusing on the family's teenage daughter, who is enrolled in a high school for children with special abilities, since "normal" schools would no longer admit her. Although initially a misfit among misfits, Wednesday ends up discovering herself and others, while exploring family values, friendship and romance, and, of course, solving a mystery while writing a crime novel, like the prodigy she is. The fictional universe of the Addams Family has always been one of fantasy and (sometimes) of the absurd, where weirdness is the norm, but strong family values and ties underline entire plots. The Addamses are often more normal than normal people by being themselves.

Finding a reason for the popularity of *Breaking Bad* among Romanian teenagers was more challenging. It was available on Netflix, the most popular streaming platform in Romania³, but it was nonetheless a mature show (rated 16+ on the streaming platform), with a very serious topic and themes. Walter White is a discontent, yet quiet family man, working two jobs, who, upon discovering he is suffering from lung cancer, turns to a life of crime, cooking meth, to provide for his family when he is gone. Ultimately, he is drawn too much to this second life, turning into a criminal mastermind, losing his family and his life in the process.

The show's appeal to teenagers can have several explanations: first of all, we are dealing with teenagers, prone to risky behaviour⁴ (including watching content that is not meant for them). Second, it presents an alien (American) societal model, which is appealing through its Otherness. Third, the widespread success of the series and its aggressive marketing (on the streaming platform, outdoor banners, social media ads) and excellent reviews made teenagers curious.

The appeal of liminality

The common denominator of these two series is liminality: both main characters are undergoing a change, just like regular teenagers do, and are similar to us, being at the same time different.

The concept of liminality was first introduced by Arnold van Gennep in 1909, in his anthropological analysis of rites of passage. He suggests calling "rites of separation from a previous world, *preliminal rites*, those executed during the transitional stage *liminal* (or *threshold*) rites, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world *postliminal rites*" (van Gennep, 1960: 21). Victor Turner, later building on this idea of liminality (word derived from the Latin *limen* = threshold), defined it as "a legitimized situation of freedom from cultural constraints and social classifications" (Turner, 1969:169). Liminality is a state where the individual (the *liminal persona* or *threshold person*) has escaped the constraints of their former status but have not yet fully integrated the norms and rules of the new one.

² <https://lacedo.ro/campania-de-marketing-netflix-pentru-wednesday-in-romania-cum-o-strategie-culturala-devine-atu-competitiv/>

³ Spark Foundry, Data Intelligence, Digital Trends October 2023: Social Media, Streaming, and Online Consumption Evolution in Romania, available at <https://dataintelligence.ro/digital-trends-october-2023-social-media-streaming-and-online-consumption-evolution-in-romania/>

⁴ See <https://www.unicef.org/parenting/mental-health/teens-risky-behaviours>

During this *liminal break*, “[l]iminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.” (Turner, 1960: 95). Moreover, social ties and hierarchies can be temporarily dissolved or even cancelled, resulting in a form of “acceptable disorder” (*communitas*), the product of dis-membering the usual system of classification, of values, and of daily behaviour (norms). This volatile state is necessary, in Turner’s view, to allow both individual transformation and the potential revitalization of the community itself, because “[l]iminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low.” (1960:97)

Feminist critics, especially Rachel Ward, remarked “the possibility that woman may be stuck in this liminal, ambiguous phase” (Ward, 2020). In other words, for women liminality is not a temporary phase, but a permanent condition. This creates a critical distinction between Wednesday’s liminality, which is temporary and age-related, and Walter’s wife, Skyler’s structural, permanent liminality, as a woman in a patriarchal society.

The *communitas* of Wednesday is manifold and it applies to the same character: throughout the show, as a teenager, and as a woman. In the first season, as a new addition to the outcast school (displaced from her family/community and not yet integrated into the academic setting into which she is brought, and as a psychic yet to find her powers). In the (recently launched) second season of the show, her liminality is related to controlling her powers: after accessing them in the first season, she has temporarily lost them by ignoring and abusing the rules, so she is on a ritualistic journey of self-exploration to exit the *communitas* and re-integrate in the community. In their own way, every protagonist of the show experiences their own liminal arc: Wednesday’s roommate, Enid, is a werewolf whose abilities have not shown yet: she is on her way of becoming part of a (literal) pack but needs to undergo a rite of passage (the transformation). Tyler (Wednesday’s main romantic interest in the first season) proves to be in the process of becoming a full-fledged monster. And perhaps the most stereotypical liminal character in the first season is Goody Addams, a spirit trapped between worlds, who cannot rest until her arch-nemesis is ultimately defeated.

The community of Walter White is familiar: it is the everyday life of an ordinary chemistry teacher in the US. His liminality is somehow self-inflicted: feeling underappreciated, learning of a death sentence (lung cancer) and using the pretext of providing for his family after he is gone, he joins forces with a drug-addict former student and meth supplier. Jesse has also left conventional community behind, but his liminality has no purpose and no apparent exit. Their joint *communitas* is based on their common activity (making and selling drugs) and perceived shared values (caring for loved ones). There is a strong bond between the two, sometimes fringing on father-son interactions. The actual son is a teenage paraplegic, also caught in between worlds: on the one hand, the natural liminality of a transitional age, on the other, that of an outcast in terms of physical ability.

Walt and Jesse’s *communitas* falls subject to Turner’s idea that “the spontaneity and immediacy of *communitas* – as opposed to the jural-political character of structure – can seldom be maintained for very long. *Communitas* itself soon develops a structure, in which free relationships between individuals become converted into norm-governed relationships between social personae” (1960:132). In other words, their little outcast endeavour becomes institutionalized within the community of drug dealers.

Skyler, Walter’s wife, as we have already seen, demonstrates the structural liminality of a woman and wife in a patriarchal society, but also temporarily joins her husband’s *communitas* by getting involved in his activities. She is forced into this state and must find the means to choose the path forward, the community where she wants to belong. As opposed to Walter, she chooses tradition and family.

Thus, liminality provides us with the vocabulary to define the transitional states of our two main characters, while the archetypes, to be further discussed, will provide the theoretical grounds to analyse the alteration of meaning and reversal of established norms from the point of view of gender issues and family portrayal in the two shows.

The archetypes

Carl Jung’s theory of archetypes offers a framework to understand the deep, universal patterns of the human psyche, the *archetypes* activated and explored during the liminal state. For the purposes of this research, we have considered Jung’s acceptance of the archetype as an “internal mental model of a typical, generic story character to which an observer might resonate emotionally” (in Faber & Mayer, 2009:307), within Faber and Mayer’s redefined matrix of modern archetypes, defined as follows “(a) are story characters, (b) are represented psychologically as mental models like self- and other-schemas and prototypes, and (c) often elicit intense

emotional responses when encountered. Also, such archetypes (d) operate at an automatic or unconscious level, and (e) are culturally enduring so as to be easily learned and widely recognizable”.

From this perspective, both shows are explorations of the Other – in *Breaking Bad*, the character’s journey is a descent into enmity (Otherness), a play on the regular man-turned-monster myth, while in *Wednesday* the journey is reversed, a story of humanization, where the “monster” is turned into a regular person.

It should be noted that the story of ascent is a feminine one, while the dramatic descent into Otherness features a male character. This note is supported by our study: the dichotomy “heroine woman vs. villain man” was mentioned in our survey by most Romanian teenagers (50.3%).

Breaking Bad archetypes

Walter White starts as a creator/magician – in his youth, he had founded a successful company and used to be a respected and visionary scientist, until he was cheated by his partners into selling his shares. Thus, he lost his first community – that of science – and made the transition to teaching/family life, where he undertook the roles of lover (albeit a poor one) and caregiver/everyman. It is in this position that he also becomes a shadow, as the switch implied going from his previous glamorous life to the anonymity of everyday life, for “everyman” is by definition anonymous. This role is rather neutral. Nevertheless, the caregiver archetype still has some positive power (to support others).

When he chooses to pursue a criminal life (cooking meth) to support his family after his death, he still retains the role of caregiver (positive motivation), but assumes other roles as well: the magician (this time, with a negative connotation, as he is making drugs), an explorer (of a new environment), and a hero (in his own eyes, justified by his noble intentions). His criminal pursuits turn him into an outlaw and, while he struggles to retain his role as a caregiver, he is completely alienated by/from his family. His final transition is to Shadow, the final outcast.

We can say that the character undergoes a series of liminalities, moving from one *communitas* to the next, up (or down) to the ultimate state, death. His journey is that of an anti-hero: he is the patriarch that has lost his way, the fallen angel.

Archetypal worlds– Breaking Bad/masculinity

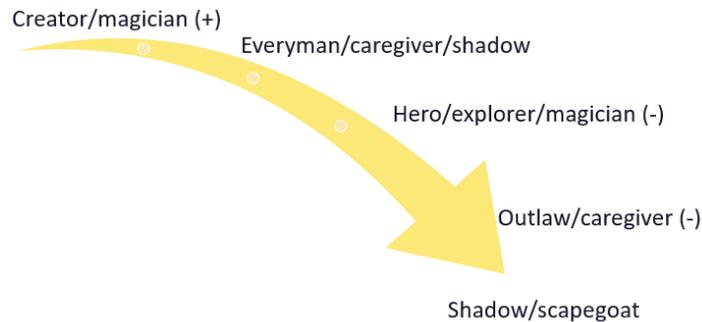


Figure 1. Walter White’s archetypal involution

The show can also be “read” from the perspective of animus/anima, the masculine/feminine duality within the characters. Walter’s more complex personality can be analysed in terms of his apparent and strongly felt emasculation. He is a brilliant scientist who loses his job in the company he has created and is relegated to the low-earning life of a chemistry teacher and part-time car washer. He is constantly mocked and belittled by his successful DEA agent brother-in-law and loses the respect of his only son. In other words, he is stripped of archetypal masculine authority. This emasculation is associated with the anima, the intrinsically feminine archetype. He becomes passive, timid and subordinate to nearly everyone around him.

The cancer diagnosis seems to be the last straw - he has been stripped of his dignity as a man, now he also loses his right to live. It is the ultimate indignity, which robs him of the last masculine role he has managed to retain: that of caretaker for his family. His reaction is to assert a toxically masculine/dominant role, although he remains nurturing and caring towards his family, at least in the beginning (his anima side). The transition to pure animus is sudden and violent; he has forcefully entered a state of liminality without any plan out. His liminal space is destructive to the extreme. Even the New Mexico desert, masterfully used as a background throughout the series, is the ideal wasteland which he chooses as his own liminal space. It is his alchemist’s furnace, his crucible. It has no rules, it is ruthless, just as the phase he has entered. His experience, set against the eminently binary and wholly masculine world of drug dealers and criminals, exposes the fragile modern masculinity and offers criticism

to a culture where male worth is seen in terms of power and provision, no matter the cost. Power often translates to violence, while provision relates to the traditional role of the patriarch. Fring, the mastermind behind the entire criminal operation, tells him: “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” (S4, E5).

Women can also be criminals, but they are masculinized to fit into that world. There is no place in it for care or support, hence Skyler can never fully integrate into it.

Skyler starts as the archetypal Mother: caring, supportive and motherly, she prepares to bring a new child into the world (another transitory liminality). She is appalled to learn of her husband's illegal activities, tries to support him until some point, gets involved in helping him. She even takes up stereotypically masculine behaviours (cheating on her husband), which she later regrets. But Walter's increasing aggressivity, as his masculinity is more toxically asserted, pushes her back to the role of victim and caretaker: she needs to protect her children from this menacing monster and escape at all costs.

Ironically, Skyler's liminal arc was the one that received the most backlash from audiences. Some may argue that her story was not linear and consistent throughout the show and that script makers did not know what to do with her, at times. This “betwixt and between” of her character development, with the constant liminality it entails, sees her in turn as understanding, subdued, assertive, aggressive, involved, caring, to sum up, unstable and inconsistent, which could bring back the image of the hysterical woman of the 19th century. Although her husband is the criminal, it feels like she should be the one institutionalized.

Wednesday archetypes

The Addams Family universe rejects the animus/anima binary: Gomez, Wednesday's father, is nurturing without compromising his masculinity, while Morticia, her mother, is authoritative without losing her family. It is Hester Frump, Wednesday's grandmother, a ruthless business owner, the most masculine and independent of the show's feminine characters, who is also redeemed on the “right path” of femininity: she must learn to compromise in order to preserve the ties to her family.

In some ways, this family is supposed to be the reverse of the traditional one. The caring father, devoid of magical powers, and the powerful assertive mother make a convincing case to this end. Nevertheless, we learn that he has sacrificed his powers to save others, so he is still a masculine Hero. Suggestions of investment in the future (“A woman should have a portfolio of her own, and not be reliant on a husband” – Hester Frump, S2, E4) are ultimately rejected and/or relegated to a minor role. The message here is that women should be powerful and independent, but there are more important things in the world. Such as family.

Archetypal worlds – Wednesday/femininity

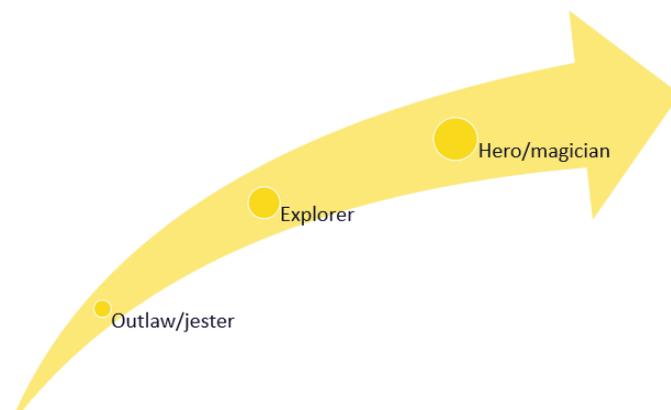


Figure 2. Wednesday's archetypal evolution

Wednesday's path is different from Walter's: she is already in a state of liminality when we meet her - in the regular school (school for `normies`) she is the outlaw by her attire and attitude, the jester by actions. She punishes her brother's bullies by throwing piranhas into their swimming pool. She can even be viewed as an angel of death, vengeful and unconcerned with consequences.

When she is sent to the Nevermore Academy, she enters a school for outcasts. She is no longer the only special one, however, her *communitas* here changes slightly. In a new environment, she becomes an explorer, this role is further cemented by her activities - novel writer and investigator.

She is still a teenager, a person in age-related transition, and, as we have seen, she is still also transitioning towards finding and mastering her psychic powers. Here, she is an explorer - learning the ropes of a new community and deciding whether to integrate or not. Up to the end, she does. She solves a crime and becomes a hero, she discovers her powers, and she becomes a magician. Her transition is not yet complete, but we can see a clear path forward. And this path has taken her from negative archetypes to positive ones, so we can safely assert that she is moving upwards on a morality scale.

In other words, Wednesday's liminality is constructive where Walter's is destructive. She is forged anew in this experience and emerges wiser, nicer, more understanding of the world into which she is supposed to fit. She is constructing, in a way, her own archetype, by blending a host of the old ones. She is growing up.

Toxic masculinity vs. reluctant femininity

Walter White

Arguing the existence of several masculinities, Shepherd Bliss, the one who coined the term "toxic masculinity" in 1995, describes it without defining it, thus: "Toxic Masculinity poisons through means such as neglect, abuse, and violence. Toxic Masculinity can wound and even be fatal to men, women, children, and the Earth. Masculinity itself is not inherently negative(...)" (Bliss, 1995:302). The notion seems to have struck a chord, and was later analysed against the concept of "hegemonic masculinity" (see the seminal discussion on the definition and revision of hegemonic masculinity by R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, 2005). More recently, the concept has come under the academia's scrutiny as too wide and very imprecise, "a buzzword across social media after Donald Trump first became President for his first term in 2017" (Mackay, 2025).

Walter's transformation has been noted as descending into toxic masculinity (Lewdon, 2016, Johnson, 2017, Wakeman, 2018, Pond, 2019, Saud et al.:2025, etc.). His initial archetypes, as we have seen, are primarily feminine ones. His liminal break is a break from emasculation in a transition to perceived masculinity. In his chosen world, "to maintain one's masculinity and position within the gender order, the men with the most status use violence to prove themselves to other men" (Pond, 2019:2).

When he tries to establish his role in the drug dealing business, for instance, Walter punishes the volatile drug dealer Tuco Salamanca by blowing up his office (S1, E6, "Crazy Handful of Nothin"). It is the emergence of Heisenberg, White's alter ego. When he learns that his partner has been meeting with Gus Fring, he hits Jesse in his own house (S4, E9: "Bug"). And perhaps the ultimate manifestation of violence is psychological, in his confrontation with a potential new dealer: "I am the cook. I killed Gus Fring. (...) Say my name." It is the moment when he actually becomes Heisenberg, claiming his place in the criminal world.

Another proof of toxic masculinity is evident in his relationships with women: blatant violence towards his wife, starting with violent language and statements ("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!" - S4, E6: "Cornered"), culminating in a marital rape (S2, E7: "Negro y Azul"), then reverting to violent language when knowing the police were listening to his call, to exonerate Skyler and to distance himself and his actions from his family (S5, E14: "Ozymandias"). With women not immediately under his control, his actions are indirectly violent: he watches Jesse's girlfriend suffocate to death without helping her (S2, E12: "Phoenix") or poisons a rival (S5, E16: "Felina").

Wednesday Addams

When it comes to Wednesday Addams, we could not find a proper "label" to use with her in terms of relative power. She is as far as it gets from the "emphasized femininity" used by Connell to contrast hegemonic masculinity, as "[t]here is no femininity that is hegemonic in the sense that the dominant form of masculinity is hegemonic among men" (Connell, 1987:183). Emphasized femininity, in this case, is a subordinated Other, subjugated to dominant masculinities. Wednesday is somewhat subordinated to the traditional family, which is not, as we have seen, necessarily patriarchal, as the mother holds the power (both literally and figuratively) in the household.

Therefore, we will provisionally use "reluctant femininity": Wednesday is still developing, still becoming a woman. She rejects "normal" teenage girls concerns such as romance ("I'm not friend material, let alone more-than-friend material. I will ignore you, stomp on your heart, and always put my needs and interests first." - S1, E7), and she is allergic to colour, as she says in the first episode ("I break out into hives and then the flesh peels off my bones"). As it turns out in the second season, this is factually true. Nevertheless, when faced with her new roommate, the colourful, boisterous Enid, she learns to compromise and agrees to split the room in half colour and half black and white, also an allegory of their two different personalities: Enid is adaptive, she sees life in a multitude of nuances and hues, while to Wednesday things tend to be clear cut and she remains critical of Enid's colourful choices: "looks like a rainbow vomited on your side" (S1, E1). There is also a scene in S1 E3, when talking

to Principal Weems, who says that “the world is not always black and white”, and that “there are shades of grey”, and Wednesday replies: “Maybe for you”. It is a powerful statement about her worldview and principles. Some critics have even implied a shift in Hollywood discourse about relativist vs. absolutist characters: “a show like Wednesday doesn’t portray the moral relativist as a hero standing up against the moral absolutist villain. Instead, the hero champions a competing vision of moral absolutism” (Wax, 2023). The same critic even went as far as to declare, in absolute terms (sic!) that “Gray is gone. So is any Solzhenitsyn-inspired sentiment of ‘the line of good and evil dividing every human heart.’ All that’s left is power. And, of course, the story.” Absolutes aside, we need to remember that this is a franchise story with a very rich background: the character of Wednesday Addams has been in the making since the creator of the Addams Family concept, Charles Addams, first introduced the family in his 1938 comics in *The New Yorker* magazine, while their specific backstories and household settings were forged way back in the day of black and white television, in the 1964 TV series.

However, there is still a lot to be said about colour in *Wednesday*. Tim Burton, the director, is already well-known for his inclination towards gothic/fantasy productions, such as *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), *Beetlejuice* (1998), *The Corpse Bride* (2005), *Frankenweenie* (2012) etc. His characters are outcasts, living in liminal situations, at times willingly so, other times reluctantly, and the choice of colours, in clothing as well as in set lighting, reflects it. Tim Burton’s choice of colour has spurred an extensive academic literature, which would (woefully) not fit within the scope and limits of the present chapter.

Returning to *Wednesday*, the show’s Production Designer, Mark Scruton declared that “It became very clear right away that it was going to be this show about opposites and conflicts... Once we had that nailed, it gave us a good anchor for everything else⁵,” when describing the concept behind the design of the stained-glass window in the girls’ room (half colourful, half gloomy and dark). The costume designer for the show (Colleen Atwood), a long-time collaborator of Burton’s, explained her choice of colour for Wednesday’s attire: “When it came to Wednesday, I didn’t want to get into the black-and-white stripe. That’s sort of a Tim signature. So I thought it would be interesting, because she was allergic to color, to do her uniform in gray. I ended up using a screen and painting the stripes so that they were not a hard stripe in gray and black.” (quoted in Williams, 2023). Through this simple statement, the character’s development (from a dualistic character to one accepting “grey” into her life) is announced.

Initially, Wednesday is also not interested in the same things as other girls her age, which is established from the very first episodes of the show: “I find social media to be a soul-sucking void of meaningless affirmation”, “I’m not interested in participating in tribal adolescent clichés” (S1, E1), “I act as if I don’t care if people dislike me. Deep down... I secretly enjoy it”, “Would you rather I develop an obsession with horses and boy bands?” (S1 E2). Nevertheless, she ends up participating in school events (she even dresses up in a cat costume for a contest and attends a ball), albeit due to ulterior motives. Openly, she will only attend because it suits her, because attendance is a means to a meaningful purpose (solving a crime or pursuing an investigation). Secretly, we get the feeling that she rather ends up enjoying it, because “[u]nderneath her icy and dark persona, she is just another teenage girl who wants to let her guard down” (Show, 2023).

She sets herself apart from the rest, creating her own liminality, decisive in her independence from the opinion and actions of others (“I like being an island. A well-fortified one surrounded by sharks” - S1, E2; “I have FOBI. Fear of being included” - S2, E3). Nevertheless, she recognizes *communitas* when she sees it: “Listen, people like me and you, we’re different. We’re original thinkers, intrepid outliers in this vast cesspool of adolescence. We don’t need these inane rites of passage to validate who we are” - S1, E5. However, she refuses to create a badge of glory out of her accomplishments, thus avoiding being included in the community: “Do not put me on a pedestal, because I will burn it down” (S2, E1).

She refuses stereotypes (“Use the words ‘little’ and ‘girl’ to address me again and I can’t guarantee your safety” - S1, E3) and seems to be well-versed in feminist concepts (when dressed for a party for the first time, her response to her date’s reaction - “You look...” is: “Unrecognizable? Ridiculous? A classic example of female objectification for the male gaze?” - S1, E7).

However, she is fiercely loyal to her friends once they get past her icy demeanour (“If he breaks your heart, I’ll nail-gun his” - S1, E3) and in each season she will go to great lengths to save them from the ever-present dangers.

The family

Family appears both as an underlying motive and motif (*Breaking Bad*), and as a support structure (*Wednesday*). In both shows, family provides a mirror image for characters to relate and adjust to. Albeit both

⁵ <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/awards/story/2023-08-19/wednesday-production-designer-cinematography>

instances provide models of traditional families and values, there are secondary characters and subplots with “non-traditional” families - in *Breaking Bad*, for instance, one of the (few) female criminals is divorced and is raising her daughter on her own, while in *Wednesday*, another (positive and somewhat naive) character has two mothers.

‘Breaking Bad’ family values

As we have seen, Walter’s family undergoes a shift from the happy, traditional American household (the father is working two jobs, the mother is a housewife and expecting the family’s second child, they have a nice house, two cars, a peaceful, almost idyllic, existence) to a dysfunctional mess (divorce, estrangement, crime).

The father becomes so trapped in his own criminal endeavours, that he fails to do what he initially declares: care for his family. Although he successfully covers his financial role, he omits the other aspects of caring: presence, affection, shared interests. He even goes as far as to kidnap his own daughter out of spite towards his wife. However, we can see that these actions are ultimately belied by the outcome: he returns his daughter and is actually devastated when his DEA brother-in-law is killed, making sure to find a way to let the police know where his body was buried. He seems to hold on to established moral values until the end, although their actual application is lacking.

His *communitas* does not include family - it is above the law, above the norms, above morality. Still, he is not fully cut off from his previous life, which he ultimately tries (and fails) to reclaim: he has done too many unforgivable things and is past redemption.

Other families portrayed in the show are more traditional, although they still have their own share of troubles - no one is perfect. Even the apparently happy couple of Skyler’s sister and Hank is affected by their childlessness and Marie’s kleptomania. Jesse’s family are also apparently very happy, but they have thrown their oldest son out due to his criminal activities, and the younger one seems to be following in his footsteps.

A different type of “traditional” family is the Salamanca crime family - here, ties are strong and commitment and loyalty are unquestionable, as the ties are forged in blood and tradition. Family goes beyond money and success, and self-sacrifice for the revenge of a dead one is not uncommon (as is illustrated by Hector’s suicide attack on Gus Fring).

And, yes, Gus Fring – Walter’s mentor in crime and arch-nemesis in drug dealing, the ruthless businessman. He mentions having children early in the show, then, when inviting Walter over to his place, there appear to be toys in the room. Nevertheless, the actual family never appear on screen, which is intentional by the show’s creators – having an actual family would humanize him too much. His rant about family importance and the role of man as a provider, mentioned above, could be just a character subterfuge to earn trust - he simply says the things the other one wants to hear. In addition, the mystery of his personal life is deliberate: “I enjoy it when I’m given by the creator of a show or a movie all the elements that will keep me interested in the story, but leave a few aside so I can do a little of the work myself. I enjoyed that kind of storytelling and I want to tell those kind of stories myself” (Vince Gilligan, *Breaking Bad* producer, quoted in St. James, 2011).

To sum up, *Breaking Bad* families are all broken in some way, whether by crime, death, rejection, or omission - there is no ideal to be followed, but only lessons to be learned.

The Addams’ values

The Addams have always been weird - it is their trademark. They eat weird things, wear weird clothes, live in a gloomy, improbable setting, have weird passions (although the father has a seemingly normal job as a lawyer). The family is extended both in life and in death. The “Grandmama” (Morticia’s mother, making an appearance in Season 2) is a successful business owner, initially estranged from her daughter. The power seems to lie with women in this family, which makes it a clear matriarchate. Especially since the show is focused on a female character, male participation is anecdotal at best, mainly in a support role. Addams males are cartoonishly drawn, immature and playful.

Nevertheless, past all the gloom and unorthodox hobbies (“My brother Pugsley is a classic Addams. He’s got a heart of gold and a passion for all things explosive.” - S1, E1, “I enjoy funerals. I’ve been crashing them since I was old enough to read the obituary section.” - S1, E7), the family is incredibly united: they all accompany their children when going to a new school, participate in school events, are always ready to help and step in when trouble looms. They are full of advice, they take pride in their legacy (Morticia and Gomez were both alumni of the Nevermore Academy and give useful insights to their daughter). The parents are openly in love, showcasing their affection on every occasion (much to the mortification of their teenage daughter): “I don’t know what to say, Gomez. Seeing you in handcuffs, accused of murder, I’ve never loved you more” (S1, E5).

They place a permanent family member (Thing) at Wednesday’s disposal, in a double capacity, that of spy and protector. Uncle Fester, one of the few adults she trusts, is ready and eager to help Wednesday in her shenanigans,

whether to provide information (such as Goody Addams' journal), to resuscitate Thing, for stakeouts, or "simply" to get himself institutionalized in a mental facility in order to do some investigating for his niece.

Goody Addams, Wednesday's ancestor, is also present in Wednesday's life, as a spiritual guide (and vengeful spirit), saving her life and gifting her with her powers. Another powerful female character in the Addams family is the already-mentioned Hester Frump. She is powerful and successful, ruthless and cynical, but she has a soft spot for her granddaughter ("Well played, my dear. You know exactly how to worm your way into my cold, desiccated heart" S2, E4).

The conclusion

There is simply too much left to be said about these two shows, be it on a further exploration of liminality and archetypes of the characters, toxic masculinity, or family values. The very different character, structure, and plot of the serial dramas analysed here provide for a wide range of tastes and interests. We know that trends are shifting with time and with each new generation. Public taste is especially fickle and prone to forgetting and rediscovering new titles. However, we believe that these two will not lose their appeal in the near future, as one (*Breaking Bad*) is already weathering rather well the test of time, and the other (*Wednesday*) is still in production (a new season has been just announced⁶).

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