



2016-2017

Article

2017

Schools for Crime: The Value of a Non-Traditional Education in *Breaking Bad*

Gabrielle Raab

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/the-mall>

Recommended Citation

Raab, Gabrielle (2017) "Schools for Crime: The Value of a Non-Traditional Education in *Breaking Bad*," *The Mall*: Vol. 1 , Article 23.

Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/the-mall/vol1/iss1/23>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Mall by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

SCHOOLS FOR CRIME: THE VALUE OF A NON-TRADITIONAL EDUCATION IN *BREAKING BAD*

Gabrielle Raab

In today's society, we give high regards to those who are educated and put great value into the education system. However, do members of society only find purpose if they are book smart and receive a traditional education? Or, do street smarts have the capability to earn their value in society as well? In Friedrich von Schiller's short story, "The Criminal of Lost Honor" (1786), and Vince Gilligan's hit TV show, *Breaking Bad*, the value of receiving a "street education" becomes evident. In addition, a parallel can be seen as each of the main characters, Christian Wolf and Jesse Pinkman, undergo their criminal advancement through these "schools for crime." As each of the characters progress throughout the short story and television series, the value of this alternative form of education is unveiled and comparison to today's traditional and respected educational system can be drawn.

In the TV show *Breaking Bad*, creator Vince Gilligan ensures that the stereotypical roles of teacher and student are apparent throughout every episode. It is clear that Walter White, the high school chemistry teacher who turns to cooking crystal meth after receiving a diagnosis of terminal lung cancer, takes on the position of the educator both inside the traditional classroom as well as inside the meth lab with Jesse. In contrast, Jesse assumes the role of the student. Despite having previous experience with the meth-making business, Jesse is aware that there is a lot he can learn and take away from Mr. White's experience with chemistry. However, both Jesse and Walt are failures in these roles that they assume, that is, until they encounter one another. Jesse is in a low position on the street hierarchy and Walt's students never care to listen to his lectures about chemistry. However, once they join together, their roles are truly fulfilled. In the episode "Crazy Handful of Nothin'", Vince Gilligan demonstrates these positions. As Walter can no longer proceed in creating his batch of meth due to a coughing fit, he encourages Jesse finish cooking. Walter says, "Go on, you do it. You can do it! If you have any questions I'll be right here" (12:47). In this scene, Walter's teaching perspective becomes evident to viewers. As a traditional school teacher, it is Walter's job to spread his knowledge of chemistry unto his students. This is exactly what Walter does, but just in a different manner. His encouragement towards his students, particularly Jesse, is displayed as well. However, what do these roles of teacher and student contribute to the value of the education system? As Jesse is educated by Mr. White's superb meth-making skills in his "school for crime," the value of street smarts is truly demonstrated.

Jesse never found use in having knowledge of typical school subjects or even doing well in school for that matter; however, he has found value in the meth business. As Walt pushes him constantly to do better and to try harder, he is forced out of his shell and is able to finish the batches of meth by himself and confront people he would have never been able to prior to these crime lessons. Truly, the value of these street smarts for Jesse lies within the fact that he enabled and forced to do things he did not think he could. On the other hand, it also earns him countless amounts of money, which one would assume becomes his one goal. However, despite this outside view of money being both Walt and Jesse's driving force, the value of this alternative form of learning is the real goal behind it all. Without further investigation, it appears as if the two characters are only in the business for its monetary outcome, but they both do so in a dispassionate manner. Vince Gilligan includes countless scenes with Jesse and Walt cooking meth with unique angles and loud music playing in the background for a very specific purpose. This is to show that there is no driving force behind it all and although they buy cool cars together and seem to be infatuated with the idea of money, deeper insight shows that they value these student and teacher roles as well as the value of this non-traditional education. Society drills into our mind that if you do not pursue a college career or some form of higher education, you are doomed to be part of the stereotypical lower class. Jesse and Walt prove this theory wrong with their meth-making business. Street smarts do have a purpose in society and those who choose to use it to their advantage will be able to see its true value.

Furthermore, the value of schools for crime is also exhibited throughout Friedrich Schiller's short story. Just as Jesse found no use in a normal education, Christian Wolf degrades society and finds no value in the people or jobs available to him. Christian initially turns to the crime of poaching in order to attract the affection of a woman who, due to his unattractiveness, has no interest in him. The forest warden, however, is after the same woman and therefore sees that Christian is given the maximum penalty for his crime and since he is a repeat offender, this means a three-year stay in the dungeon. Christian is bound to the dungeon as a social outcast and a change occurs within him. Schiller writes, "And so I finally became accustomed to the most repulsive behaviors, and in my final months there, I had even surpassed my teachers" (43). Christian obtained his street smarts through the dungeon, which served as his school for crime and he even went

as far as exceeding those who taught him. Similar to Jesse, Christian found absolutely no purpose in going back to normal society because they always found a way to rebuke him, hence the repetition of his criminal offense. However, he was able to discover value in criminal acts. This is due to the fact that he was never accepted in a normal society and when he left the dungeon, the criminal underworld gave him the honor for which he was truly searching. The value of this non-traditional education for Christian is that it ultimately led him to a place where he felt accepted by those around him.

Despite the fact that the schools for crime transformed both Jesse and Christian into criminal men, each character is still able to hint to the viewer or reader that they still have goodness hidden beneath all of the layers of criminality and deviant behavior on the outside. This is shown in the episode “Cancer Man” from *Breaking Bad*. As Jesse faces his paranoia and heads back home, his righteous nature is let out of its shell. Jesse sets the table and prepares for dinner (28:27). Although there is a part of him that is only doing this to tug at his parents’ heartstrings, Jesse, however, truly reveals a sense of compassion and caring in this scene. In comparison, this inherent goodness is displayed in Christian when, near the end of Schiller’s story, Christian feels guilt for his sins and this pushes him to confess even though he knows he will be executed. Schiller writes, “I betrayed myself of my own free will – and that God will have mercy on him some day, as he will on my now – plead for me, old man, and shed a tear on your report: I am the Innkeeper of the Sun” (55). Without any sort of virtuous nature within him, Christian would have never been pushed to confess his wrongdoings. Although he was transformed into a criminal by the men in the dungeon and they compelled him to commit his life to crime, there are still righteous aspects of Christian that shine through.

Furthermore, although both the traditional education system and this alternate form of “street school” or schools for crime differ in many ways, there are also several parallels that are evident. Street and drug-trade education only appear to care about the product produced and the education system mirrors this fact. Today’s schools across the country merely want to manufacture children that are taught to be exactly the same through standardized testing. Just as Jesse and Walt are focused on creating one consistent product in their “school” and the men in the dungeon are focused on creating criminals in theirs, so is today’s educational system intent on creating homogenous learners. When Jesse and Walt create unsatisfactory meth, they throw it out. When people in the dungeon are not converted to criminal beings, they are tormented or killed. In a similar way, the education system merely wants every single child to meet each of the standards and they have to do so in a uniform way. If not, they are deemed unfit for furthering their education or for being successful members of society.

In conclusion, the value of schools for crime is exhibited through both of the characters discussed, Jesse from Vince Gilligan's TV show, *Breaking Bad* and Christian Wolf from Friedrich Schiller's short story, "The Criminal of Lost Honor." The parallel found between both Jesse and Christian and their criminal advancement helps to display the true value of obtaining street smarts in comparison to a traditional education. Despite the fact that both characters are criminals at first glance, they are truly just and righteous in nature. Additionally, the value of this alternative form of education is evident throughout both works and provokes an intriguing comparison to and questioning of the traditional education that is implemented today. Although schools for crime may not be considered mainstream or even accepted by most people, street smarts have truly earned their place in society.

Works Cited

Gilligan, Vince. *Breaking Bad: The First Season*. High Bridge Entertainment, 2008.

Schiller, Friedrich. "The Criminal of Lost Honor." *Schiller's Literary Prose Works: New Translations and Critical Essays*. Translated by Jeffrey High. Camden House, 2008. pp. 39-55.