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## Captain America is a Meth Addict: Analyzing Vince Gilligan's Subtle and Scathing Indictment of America in *Breaking Bad*

*Sam Bannon*

America is *not* grand, and America is *not* amazing—or at least according to *Breaking Bad* creator Vince Gilligan. One could make a fairly substantial argument that the entire series of Vince Gilligan's *Breaking Bad* (2008) is a harsh critique of America's healthcare system at the time. If protagonist Walter White could have received decent healthcare following his diagnosis of terminal lung cancer, he would not have been forced to cook meth in order to pay for his treatment and leave his family without crippling debt after he passes. However, the premise of the series is only one aspect of Gilligan's reprimand on the United States. Arguably his harshest look at America comes in Season 2, Episode 4, "Down." The episode's first line is literally "Hey, Captain America!" (1:41) spoken to Jesse Pinkman, Walter White's former student and current meth cook and distribution partner, by a homeless man outside of a convenience store. This sets up the stage of Jesse being "Captain America," a symbol of the country, throughout the episode. In this episode, Gilligan takes a scolding look at how in America, when someone is down, they stay down.

The storylines in "Down" center around Walter and his wife Skyler's fraying relationship and her ever-growing distance to him, and Jesse's life quickly turning into shambles. While Walter could also be looked at as a "Captain America," Jesse is the one who is dubbed that in this episode. After Jesse is given the nickname, he walks into the aforementioned convenience store and meets Walter to receive his money from their most recent cook. Jesse is handed the money with red, white, and blue bottles in the foreground of the shot (3:12). The next time the viewers see Jesse, he is draped in yellow, typically symbolic of drugs, and he is getting legally evicted from his house. The arbiter telling Jesse that he must vacate wears a tie consisting of red, white, and blue color (9:41). Soon after, the scene with Jesse and his mother occurs – the scene in which she puts her foot down and tells him to leave. After this, Jesse is all but homeless, and she is well aware of it, too. He frantically asks her, "hey, where am I supposed to go?" She not-very-helpfully replies, "I don't know, sweetheart." (16:44) Later in the episode, Jesse throws the ice trays in a rage at the movers (20:50), he gets kicked out

by his Twaughhammer bandmate's wife (24:00), and he slams the payphone against itself after presumably either his friend Skinny Pete or Combo also do not take him in (24:30). His life is quickly spiraling down, and it soon gets worse. Almost immediately afterwards, his bike is stolen (25:10). The homeless man says, "not cool, man," as he sits on a red, white, and blue bag.

Where else does Jesse have to go? Where else *can* Jesse go? He retreats to the junkyard where the RV in which he and Walter had constructed their makeshift meth lab is being held, only to fall through the Porta Potty and be stained blue all over, going with his white jacket and red-trimmed hat (26:40). Then, when Jesse finally gets inside the RV, he sleeps on a cardboard box while he has one of their cooking masks cloaked over his face. Eventually, he has dust-ups with junkyard owner Clovis (32:56) and Walter (41:43), and then he finally gets his desperately needed money from Walter at the end of the episode (43:50).

Creator Vince Gilligan is uber-focused on the minor details, namely colors, when it comes to *Breaking Bad*, as he explained in an interview with GQ. Gilligan said, "there's quite a number of man hours spent discussing color usage and assigning colors to different characters and thinking in those terms." In other words, the colors have definite meaning. Gilligan specifically mentions starting Walt with khaki colors and then turning his palette green, to show the significance of his desire for money. Skyler is typically blue to show her sadness around her failing marriage, Hank, Walter's DEA brother-in-law, and most the of the other cops don orang or beige, Marie, Hank's wife, has purple, and Jesse typically wears yellow to symbolize the use of drugs, or occasionally a red when someone dies. There has rarely been a combination of red, white, and blue, the colors of the American flag, thus far in the series. In fact, so rare, it is practically non-existent.

Prior to "Down", the only glaring occasion the viewers see red, white, and blue collectively together is when Walter and Jesse are standing in front of red, white, and blue cars at the junkyard before their first non-fulminated-mercury deal with drug dealer Tuco (1.7 11:09). For ten total episodes, red, white, and blue is prevalent just *one* time – until "Down." As stated prior, when Jesse first receives his money, red, white, and blue is prominent in the shot. The arbiter's tie consists of red, white, and blue. The homeless man sits on a red, white, and blue bag. Jesse himself eventually becomes red, white, and (mostly) blue. (There is also a shot of an old photograph of Jesse and his sick aunt who died of cancer – not surprisingly, she has some red, white, and blue on in the picture. Another reminding-rebuke at the healthcare system (14:34)). After one occurrence of red, white, and blue in the series' first ten episodes, suddenly having four or five occurrences in one episode – an episode where the first lines spoken are "Hey, Captain America!" and is centered around a man who is not allowed to get back onto his feet – is not a coincidence.

There is an old adage that states, “if you get ‘em young, you get ‘em for life.” In this context, that can be interpreted as if someone makes a mistake as a young adult or child, it is nearly impossible to recover in society’s view. Jesse, Captain America, screwed around in school, did not “apply himself,” used drugs from an early age, and never seriously went to college (although he is in the DeVry University database (1.2 14:53)). Jesse has attempted to get out of the meth world before when he applied for the sales position at the beginning of “Gray Matter” (1.5). He is turned away, almost laughed at by the interviewer, because of his credentials. If no one will hire Jesse, if no one will hire these seemingly genuine turned-around people, what else are Jesse, the others, supposed to do? Time and time again, they revert back to essentially the only thing that society has allowed them to do – crime. In “Down,” Jesse pleads with his mom when he is being legally evicted from his house, “I’ve been thinking real seriously about business school, actually.” His mother simply shakes her head and evicts him anyways. Jesse cannot get out of the hole he dug himself because no one will let him – America will not let him.

Further going along with that point, Jesse tries just about everyone he knows who could take him in. No one does. From the WASP-y wife, to friends Badger and Skinny Pete, not one person says yes. Jesse is forced – forced by society, in a way – to resort to the only thing he has left, his RV and his meth cooking equipment. After Jesse falls through the Porta Potty, making him red, white, and now blue, he sleeps for the night in the RV. There are cardboard boxes full of the equipment since they had just moved everything inside. However, there is a cardboard box, already flattened and on the floor. If they had an extra box, why put in the RV? Why flatten it and place it prominently in the middle of the floor? This, of course, like most things in *Breaking Bad*, was done purposefully. Jesse, after being turned away by everyone, has no choice but to sleep on a cardboard box in his RV, signifying that he is one small step away from true homelessness, one small step away from having to live in a cardboard box. And what does our Captain America wear while he sleeps on the cardboard box? He wears the gas mask that he and Walter use to cook meth. The meth, and the money from it, is the only thing that can save him from homelessness because nothing else can.

America, the land of opportunity – or, at least, for certain individuals. Jesse, and others who are “down” are not those people. It is glaringly obvious that Jesse is down in *Breaking Bad*, particularly in the aptly named 2.4 “Down.” If society continuously keeps those down, how can they ever improve? If there is no opportunity for them, how can they ever get better?

Unfortunately, this is many Americans. The episode begins with Jesse being given the moniker “Captain America.” Captain America is not a strong, heroic man who helps everyone he can, because America does not help those who are most vulnerable and need help the most. Vince Gilligan paints the

picture of the true Captain America – a man who cannot be helped because no one will. Captain America is a meth addict.

#### Works Cited

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