

Juliet Kingsley

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Professor William Little

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Counting Cash, Not Sheep

Sleep is vital to survival. On average, an adult should receive seven to nine hours a night. Sleep is rejuvenating as it benefits the brain in many ways. During slumber, new information is stored, waste is disposed of, nerve cells communicate and reorganize, cells are repaired, energy is restored, and important molecules and hormones are released (Nunez). Yet, despite this laundry list of health benefits, in today's society, sleep is viewed as a drag. "Time governs modern experience," and sleep is a waste of time (Taylor 64). Sleep threatens efficiency, productivity, and profit. For Walter White, sleep threatens even more. In the first episode of *Breaking Bad*, a television show directed by Vince Gilligan, Walter, the show's protagonist, is diagnosed with lung cancer. His time is now limited, and all he has to show for his first fifty years of life is a one-story suburban house, his job teaching chemistry to unenthused high school students, and a son who needs help putting on his own clothes. Time becomes a precious commodity, and he can no longer afford to sleep soundly. Walter White sees sleep as a drag — it takes time away from his business, makes him vulnerable, and mimics death. By denying himself the luxury of sleep, Walter attempts to live in a fantasy world, one so different from his reality, and this results in a state of constant suffering.

Walter White refuses to sleep. He is portrayed laying down many times, but in only a small percentage of these scenes is he actually sleeping. The majority of the time we see Walter asleep is due to an outside force, not his own will. In one instance, he is put to sleep after being

drugged by Jesse Pinkman, Walter's young business partner. In another, he passes out after being given medication by his doctors. Again, he passes out after a fight with Jesse, and another time from exhaustion after burying his money. Many other times, he goes unconscious due to his own illnesses. These instances do not count as real "sleep." Walt does not even refer to these times as sleep, such as when he asks Skyler, "How long was I out" after laying down on the bathroom floor ("Buried"). There is not one scene that portrays Walt in his bed sleeping soundly. Every scene of him in bed has his eyes wide open, staring upwards or at the alarm clock beside him. Why does Walt never succumb to natural sleep?

Walter despises inefficiency, and he sees sleep as such. His impatience leads him to want results immediately. After an MRI scan, Walt asks the technician how the results look. The worker replies that "Dr. Delcavoli will go over the results with you next week" ("4 Days Out"). In response, Walt tries to piece together his results himself by looking at the reflection of his scans through a poster hanging on the wall (Figure 1). He makes out a blob around his lung that he assumes to be the cancer growing. It is ironic that the sign that reflects his results is one advertising the "Outer Banks," a destination known for relaxation and rest. This is a place Walter would never visit — he is not one to take vacation days. He teaches his students in between coughing up blood. He works even with his cancer until he is forced to take a few days off.

Walter sees sleep as a drag in a world where his time is ticking down. With a limited time frame on his life, Walter's number one goal is providing for his family after his death. This means using every second to make as much money as he can. And fast. There is no time for sleep, which only slows one down. Walter must have "speed. It's always a matter or, increasingly, a non-matter of time. Time and money" (Taylor 64). In order to make enough money, Walter attempts to stick to a very tight schedule making meth with Jesse. A

post-industrial society relies on the standardization of schedules. “Time and schedules was a prerequisite for factories to run efficiently,” and Walt’s own “factory” runs as such (Taylor 70). He does not allow for anybody in his business to lessen their productivity. He is constantly getting on Jesse for being late to work, leaving messages on his cell such as, “Jesse, you are now 42 minutes late. I’m starting without you” (“Half Measures”). Walter’s resentment towards Jesse grows as Jesse’s drug use causes him to sleep through important jobs. The first drug deal with Gus Fringe, a higher-up in the meth trade, occurs while Jesse is passed out from heroin, resulting in Walt breaking into Jesse’s apartment. He shakes him vigorously, screaming “Jesse. Jesse, wake up. Wake up. Wake up! Come on, damn it” until he is conscious enough to tell Walt where the meth is hidden (“Mandala”). When Badger, one of their distributors, does not provide Walt with a proper amount of cash, he tells Jesse to “wake him up. He can sleep after we’re paid” (“Better Call Saul”). He does not want to waste any time — he must “insure ‘maximum prosperity’ by developing procedures to determine ‘the maximum efficiency’ of workers” (Taylor 72).

After growing their meth empire, Walter and Jesse buy a machine to count their cash. Walter tells Jesse that “you and I, we are gonna feed this machine. I want it running 24 hours a day” (“Better Call Saul”). Walter’s desire for non-stop money production represents his embodiment of the post-industrial society that we live in, which Taylor describes as a “24/7/365 society, [where] both the limitation of work hours and the acknowledgement of the importance of leisure have disappeared” (76). Even Jesse understands the value of time, telling his friends to “smoke it up on your own time” as they discuss their plans to sell the meth (“Breakage”). Walter not only denies his partners sleep, but any sort of downtime. At one point, Walt calls on Jesse to “clear your social calendar... We have to cook... You and I need to cook through to next

Tuesday... Like it or not, we have no choice” (“4 Days Out”). Jesse was planning to spend the weekend in Santa Fe with his girlfriend, Jane, exploring the Georgia O’Keefe museum. He cancels these plans for Walt. Interestingly, Georgia O’Keefe represents the slowing of time. Her focus on flowers shows how nature, when given time, can create beauty. Walt does not want to waste time watching flowers grow. For this reason, the White’s front yard is covered with stones rather than flowers (Figure 2). The only flowers present at the White’s house is a pot growing Lily of the Valley flowers, which are only grown as poison for Walt to use on Brock, the son of one of Jesse’s girlfriends. Even these flowers are only grown for efficiency — for use in a clean, easy, attempted murder.

Walter is most vulnerable when he is asleep. He does not want to be perceived as weak, how he once saw his own father. Walter explains to Walter Junior, his son, the one memory he had of his father. Walter explains that “my mother would take me to the hospital to visit him... there, lying on the bed, is my father... He’s all twisted up... really he just scares me... the only thing I could remember is him breathing... this rattling sound, like if you were shaking an empty spray-paint can. Like there was nothing in him” (“Salud”). Walter does not want to end up like this empty man, laying in a bed struggling to simply breathe. He does not want his family, the ones he's worked so hard to provide for, to see him as nothing but a spray-paint can. Despite his fear of being seen as weak, many moments of near-rest have shown his vulnerabilities. Walt’s biggest secrets have been released while he is on the brink of sleep. After being drugged by the doctors before his surgery, Walter accidentally reveals to Skyler that he is in possession of two separate phones. When on the verge of rest after his fight with Jesse, Walt accidentally calls Walt Jr. “Jesse”, showing Junior who his father subconsciously sees as a son more than himself. After secretly being fed sleeping pills by Jesse, Walt begins to clear his conscience by explaining how

he met and conversed with Jane's dad at a bar and continuously apologizing for her death. When Walter has too much to drink at a dinner party with Hank and Marie, he lets slip to Hank that Gale may not be the Heisenberg he has been chasing after. These moments of dulled senses and lowered inhibitions make Walt unable to be the person he wants to. When he is almost asleep, he is his true self, a version he prefers to hide. Walt Jr. says that the night Walter talked with him half-asleep was the only time Walter has been himself in the past year. He told Walt that "at least last night you were—you were real" ("Salud"). The scene cuts almost immediately after this line is spoken, but not before there is a close-up on Walt's face (Figure 3). This is one of the most pained we ever see Walter. His lips began to quiver moments before the scene cuts. His biggest fear, being vulnerable, came true -- and in front of his own son.

Walter's fight against sleep illustrates his fear of losing time, the precious moments of the life he has left. Beneath the fear of sleep is a fear of something larger than his cancer and being vulnerable — it shows a fear of death itself. Sleep is the closest thing one can get to death without actually dying. The heart rate is at its very lowest point during sleep, around 40 to 50 beats per minute. Often, those with head injuries are told they should not sleep for fear they might die. The two methheads that robbed Jesse illustrate this: After Jesse hits the man on the head, his wife tells him "don't fall asleep baby... don't fall asleep" for fear that he may have a concussion ("Peakaboo"). When confiding to his family about why he does not want to undergo Chemotherapy, Walt admits his fears. He doesn't want his family to view him as "some dead man... some artificially alive... just marking time" ("Gray Matter"). Laying in bed, unable to move, is analogous to death for Walt. Instead, he attempts to use all of his time to make as much money as he can for his family. Those that are not efficient with their time are viewed as good as dead. In an industrial society, "when people have nothing further that can be taken from them,

whether resources or labor power, they are quite simply disposable” (Crary 44). If Walter goes to sleep, he no longer can be productive. He is as disposable as these individuals who cannot offer labor. His fear of death and its relation to sleep is further emphasized when he watches Jane choke on her own puke while she and Jesse sleep. He stands over her in a state of shock and horror as she goes limp. This affirms his fear that sleep will lead to death.

If Walt spends so much energy resisting sleep, it is fair to question why he would lie about his sleep habits to others. One doctor asks Walt “And how are you sleeping?” to which he replies, “Fine. Most nights” (“Bit by a Dead Bee”). During a monologue to Jesse, Walt says he’s been sleeping the best he ever has. Walt explains that he has “spent my whole life scared. Frightened of things that could happen, might happen, might not happen. Fifty years I spent like that. Finding myself awake at 3 in the morning. But you know what? Ever since my diagnosis, I sleep just fine.... And I came to realize it’s that fear that’s the worst of it. That’s the real enemy. So... get up. Get out in the real world” (“Better Call Saul”). Walt is convincing Jesse of this truth almost as much as he is convincing himself. He still lies in bed awake at three o’clock in the morning. He is honest that fear is the worst part, but he has not overcome that fear. By still denying himself the right to sleep, he is stopping himself from benefiting from the “revivifying carelessness of sleep, for a periodic interval of being free of fears, and for a temporary ‘forgetfulness of evil’” (Crary 28). Without letting himself be vulnerable and careless in rest, fear persists. Despite trying to convince himself otherwise, he still struggles with the fears of losing time, losing money, sleeping, and death. His denial of the grasp fear has on him causes him to remain in a state of suffering.

Suffering “is a consequence of the distance between the ego and the ego-ideal, the distance between who I feel myself to be and who I want to be” (Phillips 146). Walter denies his

situation to others and to himself, causing an uncomfortable dissonance and leading to his constant state of suffering. Crary ties sleep deprivation and suffering together, explaining that “as the corrosion of sleep intensifies, it may become clearer how the solicitude that is essential for the sleeper is not qualitatively different from the protectiveness that is required by more immediately obvious and acute forms of social suffering” (Crary 28). At every turn, Walt fights against his uncontrollable diagnosis. When explaining why he does not want to undergo chemotherapy, Walt explains that “for what time I have left, I want to live in my own house. I want to sleep in my own bed... I don't wanna... lie around... too tired to get up” (“Gray Matter”). Walt will physically fight against the cancer that is trying to slow down his body. If he resists the urge to sleep, then he has not succumbed to the drag of the illness. Yet, he is only fighting himself. His fight against sleep is a way for him to fight against his own reality. This is a fight between who he is and who he wishes he was — the Chemistry teacher dying of cancer versus the meth mastermind Heisenberg. This internal struggle makes Walt suffer. Sleep deprivation itself is a form of suffering. Historically, it was a form “of torture endured by the many victims of extrajudicial rendition, and by others imprisoned since 2001, has been the use of sleep deprivation” (Crary 5). By attempting to resist sleep, to not succumb to the illness he has been so unfairly victimized by, he lives in a fantasy world. He attempts to live in a fantasy -- a world so different from the reality he is living in. Even Skyler is aware of Walt’s different reality. Walt tries to convince her to allow him to move back into their home, saying their cover story would make more sense if he were “back sleeping in his own bed,” to which Skyler replies, “wow. It’s suddenly a fantasy story” (“Half Measures”). Not only is it out of the realm of possibility for Walt to move back into the house, but it is a fantasy for him to “sleep in his own bed,” as the viewer has never once seen Walt peacefully asleep there. Philips says that, “in

fantasy, in the wishing scene, we leapfrog over the obstacles, or rather we don't succumb to them... we fast-forward through the frustrating bits" (140). "Leapfrogging" over the obstacle of sleep is Walter's way of not succumbing to its drag.

For Walter, the clock is a constant reminder of the countdown on his life. The night is consistently marked by the passing of time as displayed on the digital face of the clock. Every second that passes is another second closer to death. He is often caught staring at the clock instead of sleeping. At least by being awake, he can fight the mini-death that is sleep. The alarm clock is a symbol of efficiency and speed — it does not sleep. 24 hours a day it keeps moving at a constant pace. Mark Taylor says that the "emergence of industrial capitalism presupposed not only the development of new technologies and educated workers but also the standardization and regulation of human behavior, which would not have been possible without... clocks" (65). The clock is a symbol of the industrial society that sits beside one's bedside and reminds them when its time to work. Walter's clock counts the remaining seconds of his life as he lays watching it. It also reminds him that time is money, and it must not be wasted. At one instance, the clock on the side table changes from an alarm clock to Walt's wristwatch (Figure 4). As he goes to bed one night, he stares at this watch, and the audience hears its steady ticking. Wristwatches are "personal technologies that bind individuals to ever-accelerating engines of production and reproduction" (Taylor 71). The change from the digital clock to the wristwatch shows Walt's increasing desire for productivity.

In attempting to avoid bed, Walter causes many others to be put on bedrest. A prominent example of this is Hank. Walt injures Hank, directly and indirectly, multiple times. The first crossover between Walter's business and Hank occurs during the showdown with Tuco Salamanca. After fighting Tuco, Hank develops symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder,

which worsened after the following events in El Paso. When talking to Marie, he admits that he does not “sleep at night anymore... Ever since that Salamanca thing... it changed me” (“One Minute”). Later on, Walt’s ties with Leonel and Marco Salamanca cause Hank to be injured and put into physical therapy to regain the use of his legs. Walt again places Hank in direct peril when he pulls a dangerous U-turn with Hank in the passenger's seat, purposefully getting T-boned by an oncoming car. Moments before the crash, Hank yells for Walter to “slow down,” but Walter is never one to slow down (“Crawl Space”). The crash scene cuts to the White family surrounding Hank, once again placed on bedrest. This time, Hank dons a neck brace. Hank’s wife, Marie, is yet another person touched by Walt’s insomnia. Once Marie finds out Walt’s true identity, she confides in her therapist about the toll that it has taken on her. She says, “I can’t sleep. I’m not eating. Last night I was online for six hours looking up untraceable poisons” (“Rabid Dog”). Skyler is another character who requires bedrest after being tangled in Walt’s high-speed life. After breaking down, she remains in bed for days. When Walt touches her, she looks scared and shaking. She knows that he is the danger.

Jesse too is affected by Walt’s sleepless business model. After the death of the kid on the dirt bike, Jesse tells Walt that he hasn’t “been able to sleep the past few nights just thinking about [the kid]” (“Buyout”). Walt’s response lacks any empathy. Walt tries to reason with Jesse, saying, “But, Jesse, now, finally, we’re self-sufficient. Finally we have everything that we need and no one to answer except ourselves.” He sees the death of the kid only as an obstacle in keeping the business running. Walt’s failure to help Jane survive an overdose, watching her choke up on her own vomit, also causes distress in Jesse. After her death, Jesse has countless sleepless nights of agony and pain. The death also affects the sleep of Jane’s father, Donald Margolis, who too must internalize the pain of her untimely death. In a culture of speed, Donald does not stay out of work

for as long as he should. When talking to a fellow employee on his first day back at work as an air traffic controller, he explains that “after a certain point, time off doesn’t help so I figured I’d rather be here. Focus on work” (“Bit by a Dead Bee”). Donald is trying to speed up the healing process, but this does not work. His attempt to speed to work after restless nights leaves him distracted and distressed. His unfocused work leads to the collision of two passenger planes, resulting in the deaths of 167 people. His heartbreak and lack of sleep led to a loss of focus, and “losing focus or becoming distracted not only resulted in inefficiencies, but also could cause accidents that might result in serious injury or even death” (Taylor 75). This tragedy mirrors a real historic event. On October 5, 1841 “two Western Railroad passenger trains collided on the country’s first intersectional rail link... speed was deemed the culprit” (Taylor 69). A world of speed leads to mistakes and deaths, even in those who try to use speed as an advantage.

The end of the series shows how Walt’s long-held view of the bliss of efficiency was wrong. Put simply, “the denial of sleep is the violent dispossession of self by external force, the calculated shattering of an individual” (Crary 7). Walt’s constant denial of the bed leads him to fold in on himself — his cancer gets worse, he loses his family, he loses weight. In this post-industrial society, it is often thought that “faster is always better, and the best way to become more efficient and get faster is by cutting out the ‘fat’” (Taylor 86). At the end of his life, Walter White is physically losing his fat. In “Granite State,” his wedding ring slides off his finger in a sign of weaning weight. Yet, this is not a sign of efficiency like was once thought. Instead, it demonstrates how his attempt in speed has left him sleeping alone, cold, and close to death. Walt’s fatal flaw is that he still cannot get away from this society of speed. Even after tying his wedding ring around his neck because his finger is too small to hold it any longer, he continues to be fast. He calls his son on the phone and tells him that “we don’t have much time” (“Granite

State”). Walter Jr., now Flynn, has always been the antithesis of speed. Physically, he cannot move fast — his inability to walk properly slows his movements and a stutter slows his speech. He has never needed to be fast, even promising his parents that he will “always go the speed limit or below, way below” (“Cornered”). Flynn does not succumb to Walt, despite his offering of \$100,000 being sent to him by way of his friend, Louis. Flynn screams to Walter over the phone “I don’t want anything from you,” and he means it. Not his speed. Not his drugs. Not his parenthood. Not his money. He furthers the blow by asking Walt, “Why are you still alive? Just die already.” He wants Walt’s speeding to end once and for all, and this wish eventually comes true.

Walter’s final demise leaves him in the position he so often fought to get out of — laying down (Figure 6). Walter finally rests, surrounded by everything that had kept him awake and moving. The question remains — is Walter truly resting? The Welsh believed that “the dead who were not properly laid to rest would be left to walk ceaselessly on earth. They would become the restless dead, never bound up in the spirit of their race” (Hyde 52). They lay out two different types of deaths — the ones “that opens forward into a greater life and another — a dead-end death — that leaves a restless soul, unable to reach its home” (Hyde 57). The series finale makes us question which of these deaths Walter experiences. On the one hand, he dies alone without a family or a home after already experiencing a lifetime of restlessness. Yet, the final look on his face is one of relief — as if all the suffering he endured has finally come to an end. Though it is up for debate if Walter is a troubled soul or at peace, what is certain is that he worked around the clock for more time and money, and in the end, he died with neither.

Appendix



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

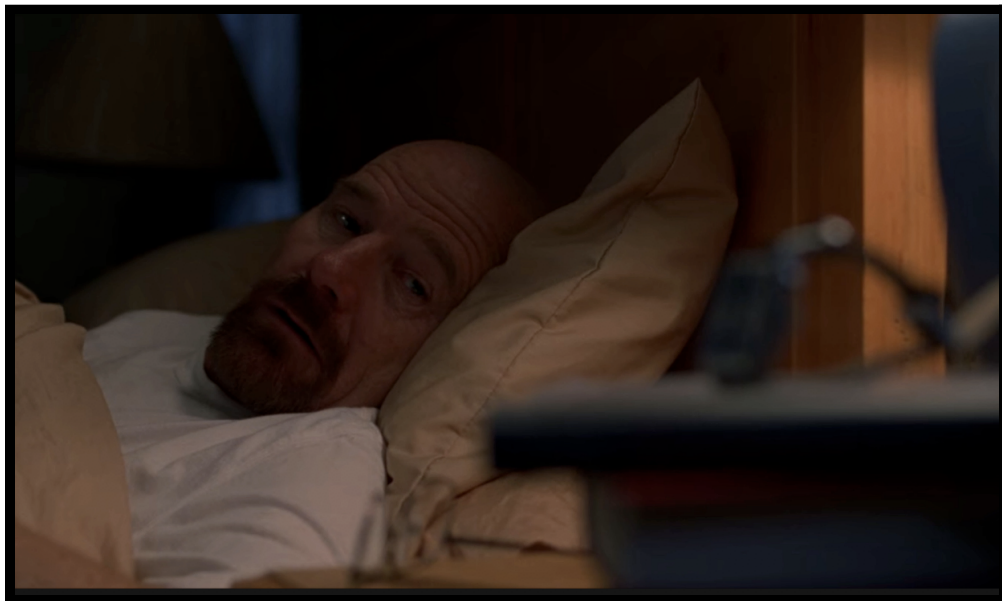


Figure 4



Figure 5

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