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## **“I HAVE PEOPLE WAITING FOR ME”: THE REDEMPTIVE POWER OF LOVE AND SACRIFICE IN *BETTER CALL SAUL*<sup>2</sup>**

A spin-off of one the most critically acclaimed TV shows ever, *Better Call Saul* had to meet very high expectations of the *Breaking Bad* fans and critics. However, thanks to its complexity and its memorable characters, the show turned out to be not only as good as the previous one, but also more successful in certain aspects. One of the reasons for such positive critical acclaim is certainly the introduction of numerous morally ambiguous characters, whose complexity blurs the boundaries between good and evil. In this paper, we are going to focus on the development of such characters with the aim of unveiling their good characteristics, and the aspects of their personalities which distinguish them from their morally corrupt counterparts. In the analysis, particular attention will be paid to four characters – the main character, Jimmy McGill, his partner Kim Wexler, and two supporting characters involved in the drug trafficking business – Mike Ehrmantraut and Nacho Varga. As we are going to demonstrate, what these characters have in common is the fact that, unlike the other characters involved in criminal affairs, they are capable of loving other people unconditionally and ready to sacrifice for them, which proves to be the key to their redemption.

*Keywords:* *Better Call Saul*, Jimmy McGill, morally ambiguous characters, love, sacrifice, redemption

### **Introduction – the rise of morally ambiguous characters**

Since the end of the twentieth century, and especially in the last twenty years, the audience's perception of TV shows has changed significantly. As Mittel (2020: 15–16) states, the category of “prestige television” rose in the twenty-first century, distancing itself from the early television considered “a lowbrow medium” compared to literature, theater, and film. One of the main differences between the two forms of television is clearly noticeable in the characters that became much more complex and ambiguous. As opposed to the old-fashioned distinction between heroes and villains, the shows like *The Sopranos*, *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*, often referred to as the “new television”, are focused on morally ambiguous characters, popularly called anti-heroes, whose choice to act immorally is usually ascribed either to their inability to meet the society's expectations or their need to adapt to the morally corrupt society by following its

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rules. Therefore, as Siobhan Lyons (2021: 244) concludes in her article on the characters of Tony Soprano, Walter White and Jimmy McGill, although the actions of the three characters are "on par with a complex brand of villainy", they also disclose that "true villains are those in byzantine systems who perpetuate existing class struggles, establishing the very conditions that create these anti-heroes in the first place".

According to Lyons (2021: 226), the aforementioned transition coincided with the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, as "the impact of the attacks and America's subsequent involvement in the Iraq War led to greater moral ambiguity in the United States". This state of moral ambiguity, she concludes, "provided a convenient landscape for characters such as Tony Soprano, Jimmy McNulty, and Walter White to emerge" (Lyons 2021: 226). Furthermore, it is not only the overall political climate in the US which gave way to the increasing popularity of such characters. The viewers' interest in their stories, as well as the tendency to relate to them, paved the way for the creation of new complex characters reminiscent of Tony Soprano and Walter White. In the article "When Good Characters Do Bad Things: Examining the Effect of Moral Ambiguity on Enjoyment", Krakowiak and Oliver (2012) look into the reasons why the viewers find morally ambiguous characters so appealing, emphasizing three main aspects thanks to which they are considered as enjoyable as, or even more enjoyable than good characters. The first reason is related to characters' plausibility, given that their moral ambiguity makes them more realistic and more successful in depicting the complexity of human nature (Krakowiak, Oliver 2012: 119). Furthermore, morally ambiguous characters boost the viewers' immersion into a narrative world thanks to their multidimensionality, making readers more absorbed in their stories (Krakowiak, Oliver 2012: 120). Finally, morally ambiguous characters are less predictable than good and bad characters, generating suspense "by transcending viewers' expectations horizons". (Krakowiak, Oliver 2012: 121).

There are, however, other important strategies used to make morally ambiguous characters more appealing to the audience. For instance, the right framing, as well as focusing on the character's particular point of view, may easily result in the viewers justifying the characters' immoral actions. The main argument which can be used to prove this observation is the existence of the spin-off series *Better Call Saul* in the first place. While Saul Goodman is one of the most interesting supporting characters in *Breaking Bad*, not until we are shown his perspective in the spin-off can we truly understand the development of his character and sympathize with him. Furthermore, anti-heroes are always shown in relation to other morally corrupt characters, such as ruthless criminals, due to which the audience cannot help but consider them morally superior. Therefore, the shows which follow the development of such characters usually depict their struggles to adapt to morally bereft societies, as well as the injustice they face in their attempts to make their mark. For instance, both in *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*, we observe how the main characters are treated unjustly from the very beginning, which slowly

gives way to their developing new personas, with the aim of obtaining what they believe they deserve.

However, there are some obvious differences in the transformation of the two characters, which make Jimmy McGill, aka Saul Goodman, much more likable and relatable than Walter White. While the viewers do sympathize with Walter White, especially at the beginning when they find out about his diagnosis of lung cancer, his struggles to support his family working as a chemistry teacher, as well as the fact that he was robbed of his patent by his former partners a long time ago, his moral decline happens at breakneck speed, as it becomes clear that his unforgivable deeds are actually fuelled by his selfish pursuits rather than the need to provide for his family. On the other hand, the decline of Jimmy McGill, and his transformation into the character the viewers remember from *Breaking Bad*, proves to be much more gradual, and caused by his brother's insistence that he would never be able to become a law-abiding citizen and a successful lawyer, after Jimmy's many attempts to prove himself to him. Therefore, as Lyons (2021: 239) states, Jimmy McGill "elicits our sympathies and our pity as the hypocrisies of corporate life slowly chip away at his resolve, pushing him further toward the world of Saul Goodman". Furthermore, as she concludes, what makes Jimmy's transition into Saul "more devastating" than Walt's into Heisenberg is the fact that "Walt no longer seeks the validation of corporate society", while Jimmy "nevertheless seeks the approval of those who exist within mainstream society" (Lyons 2021: 441). Last but not least, even though Jimmy is involved in various frauds and other criminal offenses, his actions are not nearly as cruel and ruthless as those of Walter White. Unlike the *Breaking Bad* protagonist, who dies at the end of the series having spent the last two years of his life proving to everybody what he is capable of, and having admitted to his wife that he had done it for himself, Jimmy McGill sacrifices for his ex-partner, Kim Wexler, and accepts to spend the rest of his life in prison. As Saraiya (2016) observes, while Walter White is "a bold man who dies", Jimmy McGill is "a craven one who lives", which turns him into a "pathetic anti-hero".

Considering the differences between the two TV shows and focusing on the development of four characters in *Better Call Saul*, the aim of the analytical part of this paper is to show the characters' good sides, mainly noticeable in their care for other people and willingness to sacrifice. Furthermore, even though they do not absolve them from guilt, we are going to demonstrate how the characters' good traits help the viewers understand their choices and sympathize with them.

### **"Apart we're okay, but together we're poison" – Jimmy McGill and Kim Wexler**

The fluid identity of the main character in *Better Call Saul* has been an inspiring topic for critics who have analyzed different aspects of his complex personality. The show is focused on the character the viewers remember as Saul

Goodman, the “criminal lawyer”<sup>3</sup> who worked for Walter White in *Breaking Bad*, depicting his transformation from an aspiring lawyer trying to make his mark and occasionally resorting to minor and harmless cons, to the flamboyant and unscrupulous character from the previous series. Even though the brilliant Bob Odenkirk was initially cast only as a guest actor in *Breaking Bad*, his character proved to be so likable and intriguing, that the creators soon came up with the idea of a show which would focus on his development.

In the first seasons of *Better Call Saul* we follow the story of Jimmy McGill who is determined to follow in his elder brother’s footsteps and become a successful attorney at law despite his shady background as a con artist. As it was already noted, the transition towards Jimmy’s other persona Saul Goodman is gradual and the limits of his identity prove to be exceptionally fluid. As Ralston (2022: 15) observes: “it’s not as if good Jimmy could meet evil Saul”, “instead, the process of moral decline is steady and slow”. Furthermore, the Saul Goodman persona is not the only alias that Jimmy McGill uses, as *Better Call Saul* also follows the events after *Breaking Bad* when Jimmy is on the run due to all the criminal acts he has committed, hiding under the third name – Gene Takavic. However, it can be said that Jimmy’s fluid identity is concocted of four personas, which are inextricably intertwined. First, there is his “Slippin’ Jimmy” persona, the name his brother and childhood friends use for his young self, when he used to perform scams in his hometown. Then, his real name, James (Jimmy) McGill, may be attributed to the good and righteous side of his personality, especially at the end of the series, which we will discuss in detail later on. The Saul Goodman persona can be considered a more “advanced” version of “Slippin’ Jimmy”, i.e. a person who resorts to cheating and scamming after having tried to prove himself to others in vain. And finally, Jimmy’s last transition is caused by the need to hide and avoid going to jail by getting a new identity. That last persona, Gene Takavic, is shown at the beginning of each season in a flash-forward, as well as in the last few episodes of the series, where we follow the trial for all the criminal acts that Jimmy committed under the name Saul Goodman. However, as Kristina Šekrst rightfully observes in her article on Jimmy McGill’s “slipping identity”, Gene Takavic proves to be only a camouflage and does not truly represent a new identity:

So, who is James McGill? A little bit of everything, and it depends on the point of time we’re observing. He really was Slippin’ Jimmy and Saul Goodman at different points in his life. He’s superficially Gene Takavic, but this doesn’t bear any identity-altering changes except for the silly mustache (Šekrst 2022: 109).

Before paying more attention to the end of the series, when Jimmy McGill finally prevails over his unscrupulous counterpart Saul Goodman, we need to analyze the development of the character in the first few seasons. In the beginning, Jimmy is shown as an aspiring lawyer working on the cases no one else

3 My emphasis related to Saul Goodman’s first appearance in *Breaking Bad*, when Jesse Pinkman tells Walter White that he needs a criminal lawyer, emphasizing the word „criminal“ so that it would be clear that they need a lawyer who is also a criminal himself.

is interested in and struggling to develop a career in law even though very few people believe in him. The most important aspects of his personality are revealed in relation to two important characters – his brother Charles (Chuck) McGill, a successful lawyer who still sees his brother as “Slippin’ Jimmy” and doesn’t believe in his ability to change, and his partner Kim Wexler who truly believes in him, but eventually succumbs to his influence and starts to enjoy the scams they perform together.

Jimmy’s relationship with his brother is a very complex one, and according to many critics proves to be the key to his transformation into Saul Goodman. As Ralston (2022: 16) points out, Jimmy’s moral decline is caused by “various circumstances which slowly wore down his will to do good.” Even though Jimmy’s morally ambiguous nature is conspicuous from the very beginning, he is also shown as an incredibly charming and intelligent character, who loves his brother deeply, and cares about him despite Chuck’s condescending attitude. Due to Chuck’s unusual condition called “electromagnetic hypersensitivity”, which makes him “allergic” to electronic devices, he needs to be taken care of and Jimmy takes on all the responsibility when it comes to the maintenance of Chuck’s house and meeting his daily needs. Even though his brother’s condition is almost certainly psychosomatic, Jimmy still sacrifices for him, supplying him with all the necessary things to make his daily life easier – from groceries and newspapers to gas and huge packs of ice, to make it possible for Chuck to conserve and prepare food. Through his meticulous care for his brother, it becomes clear how much Jimmy loves Chuck, and how Chuck truly matters to him despite all the differences between them.

On the other hand, Chuck only seems to take advantage of Jimmy’s kindness, and sabotages all his attempts to practice law. However, through numerous flashbacks the viewers become familiar with Chuck’s side of the story, when he was there to defend his brother after various misdemeanors which he committed as an adolescent. Furthermore, we also gain insight into Jimmy’s and Chuck’s relationship with their parents, especially with their father who was the epitome of goodness, which other people used to take advantage of. Jimmy was the one who realized that it was no use being good and kind only to be scammed by various con artists afterward, and we learn that he even stole money from his father’s till, which led to the crash of the family business and eventually his father’s death. Therefore, through the flashbacks we learn that Chuck not only blames his brother for their father’s death, but that he has always been extremely jealous of his brother for being their parents’ favorite, especially because they never wanted to believe in the fact that Jimmy was capable of embezzling money from the store.

Even though Jimmy’s actions from the past led to serious consequences and they cannot be justified by any means, at the beginning of *Better Call Saul* we witness his true efforts to change his ways, constantly seeking approval from his brother and never being able to gain it. Therefore, though Chuck has reasons to despise Jimmy, he never actually gives him an opportunity to change, always considering him the “Slippin’ Jimmy” he used to be. For that reason,

when Jimmy finally manages to obtain a law degree and pass the bar exam, Chuck does everything in his power to keep him away from his business, the company Hamlin Hamlin McGill (HHM) which he established with his partners. In season 1 episode 9, when Jimmy realizes that it was Chuck who sabotaged his employment in HHM and that he does not even want him to use the name McGill as a lawyer to "avoid confusion", he confronts his brother, only to find out that Chuck does not consider him a real lawyer:

*Jimmy:* You told him not to hire me. (...) You didn't want me!

*Chuck:* You're not a real lawyer. I know you. I know what you were, what you are. People don't change. You're Slippin' Jimmy. And Slippin' Jimmy I can handle just fine but Slippin' Jimmy with a law degree is like a chimp with a machine gun. (BCS, "Pimento")

The nickname "Slippin' Jimmy" is mentioned quite often in the series to indicate Jimmy's inability to suppress his deceitful nature. At the end of the first season when Jimmy meets his old friend Marco with whom he used to perform scams, we learn that even Marco finds it difficult to believe that Jimmy has become a lawyer and that he does not have an intention of deceiving anybody:

*Jimmy:* Marco, I am a lawyer.

*Marco:* What?

*Jimmy:* Honest to God. I do elder law, which is like wills and estates.

*Marco:* So you're ripping off old people?

*Jimmy:* No, I'm not ripping off old people. I'm not ripping off anyone.

*Marco:* Holy crap. Slippin' Jimmy is a lawyer. (BCS, "Marco")

Therefore, Jimmy's transformation into Saul Goodman proves to be inevitable as the story progresses, as he merely embraces what others think of him, and stops trying to suppress the dark and deceitful aspect of his personality. According to Cash (2022: 77), both Jimmy McGill's and Mike Ehrmantraut's transformation into the criminal figures they will eventually become does not take place "through a sense of resentment towards others", as was the case with Walter White. Instead, Cash (2022: 77) argues that their anger is "above all directed at themselves", and that their change takes place "through their gradual acceptance of a negative image of themselves, or what the contemporary philosopher Martin Hägglund calls a 'negative self-relation'". Therefore, in Jimmy's case, Chuck's constant insistence that he knows his brother well and that he will never be able to change paradoxically leads to Jimmy's embracing his other persona Saul Goodman, as a result of the negative image he has built of himself. The irony is obvious in the very name he chooses for his new identity. Even though the name is a result of wordplay and inspired by the phrase "it's all good, man" that Jimmy often uses, we cannot help but notice that, ironically enough, the pronunciation of the name "Saul" is quite similar to "soul", and that the last name "good man" is anything but appropriate for his new, morally corrupt persona.

However, what the show constantly questions is definitely the distinction between what is considered morally acceptable and what it means to be truly good. The distinction is clear when the two brothers are compared. Even

though Chuck is morally superior and always abides by the law, the morally ambiguous Jimmy is actually the one who is good at heart as he is capable of love and sacrifice. He cares for his brother, he sacrifices for his partner, Kim Wexler, and he is exceptionally kind to elderly people while practicing elder law. Despite always acting morally Chuck is extremely selfish and self-centered, and does not refrain from hurting his brother. At the end of the third season, when Jimmy comes to see if Chuck is alright even though they had previously fallen out and Chuck had him disbarred for a year, he only gets the cold answer: “I don’t wanna hurt your feelings, but the truth is you’ve never mattered all that much to me” (*BCS*, “Lantern”). This scene proves to be pivotal for the further development of Jimmy’s character, as it leaves him completely disillusioned and finally aware of the fact that he has been trying to prove himself to his brother in vain.

Finally, the scene in which we witness Jimmy’s final decision to stop trying to adapt to those who will never accept him is the one at the end of the fourth season, when, after Chuck’s death, several high school students are given an opportunity to get a scholarship to study law as part of Chuck’s legacy. Namely, Jimmy recognizes himself in one of the applicants, a young girl who used to be a shoplifter, but who now truly regrets it and has been working very hard to get good marks and be able to study law. After it becomes clear to him that nobody else is going to vote for her, Jimmy tells her that her battle is lost before it is even fought:

You didn’t get it. You were never gonna get it. They... They dangle these things in front of you, they tell you you got a chance but, I’m sorry, it’s a lie. Because they had already made up their mind and they knew what they were gonna do before you walked in the door. You made a mistake, and they are never forgetting it. As far as they’re concerned, your mistake is just... It’s who you are. And it’s all you are. And I’m not just talking about the scholarship, I’m talking about everything. I mean, they’ll smile at you, they’ll pat you on the head but they are never ever letting you in (*BCS*, “Winner”).

In this scene, one cannot help but sympathize with Jimmy whose life is marked by his past actions, and who does not truly get a chance to use his excellent skills for good. Even though he often resorts to some minor scams to get the best possible outcome for his clients, Jimmy really is an excellent lawyer. As Cash points out, referring to the scene where a young Jimmy has a conversation with a conman who is trying to deceive his father, and who tells him that there are two sorts of people in this world – the wolves and the sheep:

To Chuck’s mind, Jimmy is a wolf in sheep’s clothing, full of laughs and smiles as he scams the gullible. But what we learn is that he is really something like the opposite: a vulnerable sheep who dons the costume of a wolf because it is the only way he feels he can be noticed (Cash 2022: 83).

As opposed to Chuck, who does not believe in his brother, Jimmy’s partner, Kim Wexler, is the one who truly loves Jimmy the way he is, and wants him to have a successful career. Although the nature of their relationship is not

very clear at the beginning, it gets stronger throughout the series, and the fact that they truly love and support each other seriously compromises the viewers' moral principles as they witness the moral decline of the two characters. Almost all the illegal actions which Jimmy commits in the first two seasons are inspired by his need to help Kim, or to fight against the injustice done to her. For instance, when Kim resigns from her position in HHM, the company founded by his brother, and the two of them decide to set up their own practice, Jimmy falsifies certain documents so that Kim would take over the client she brought to the company herself, despite HHM's insistence that they have the right to keep the client for themselves. After Chuck accuses Jimmy of fabricating those documents, Kim takes Jimmy's side even though she knows he is guilty and, at the same time, shows how well she understands Jimmy's discord with his brother by telling Chuck that his support is everything Jimmy has been striving for:

I know he's not perfect. And I know he cuts corners. But you're the one who made him this way. He idolizes you, he accepts you, he takes care of you. And all he ever wanted was your love and support. But all you've ever done is judge him. You never believed in him, you never wanted him to succeed. And you know what? I feel sorry for him. And I feel sorry for you. (BCS, "Nailed")

When it comes to Kim's character, at the beginning she comes across as rather mysterious and we do not know much about her personality or her past. We only know that she is remarkable at her job, extremely hard-working and conscientious, and very supportive of Jimmy even though she disagrees with some of his actions. In season two, we only find out that Kim comes from a very small town "barely on the map" and that she has always wanted "more" (BCS, "Inflatable"). As Kim seems exceptionally righteous at first, and appears to have high moral standards despite her fondness for Jimmy, it really comes as a surprise when she starts performing scams with Jimmy. Therefore, even though the viewers are led to believe that she is slowly succumbing to his influence, it becomes clear that Kim also has a "dark side" to her, which she is trying to suppress. However, not until the very last season do we find out that she also used to be a shoplifter as a child under the influence of her irresponsible and negligent mother. Therefore, both Jimmy and Kim used to perform scams as children, the only difference being that Jimmy did it in spite of having a good role model and Kim only looked up to her mother who was also a thief. As Clipsham points out, Jimmy and Kim see scamming as an entertaining activity, and sometimes find it extremely difficult to resist the temptation:

When Jimmy and Kim participate in their antics at a variety of bars, they don't do it with any clear objective in mind. In contrast to nearly every other character in the show, their deceptions are not carefully curated, or geared at some greater purpose. Rather, they take pleasure in the act of scamming itself. It is a pastime, a hobby, or an art that they enjoy mastering together (Clipsham 2022: 4).

Nevertheless, although Kim does enjoy performing scams with Jimmy, she seems to have a stronger sense of morality, and in the first few seasons,



she usually withdraws very quickly, or reproaches Jimmy when he does something unlawful. For that reason, it really comes as a surprise, even to Jimmy, when she starts convincing him that they should start plotting against their colleague, Howard Hamlin, so that Jimmy would finally get the money from a lawsuit which was started a long time ago. In season 5, episode 10, when Jimmy points out how much harm they would have to do to Howard, and that they would have to do “something unforgivable”, Kim replies that they are only talking about “a career setback”. Bewildered by her attitude Jimmy states that such an action would not be in character: “Kim, doing this... it’s not you. You would not be okay with it. Not in the cold light of day”, to which she slyly replies “Wouldn’t I?” (BCS, “Something Unforgivable”) However, after their plan spirals out of control ending in Howard’s murder by Jimmy’s client Lalo Salamanca, a psychopathic drug lord who comes to confront Jimmy and Kim about an assassination attempt on his life, Kim immediately leaves Jimmy and resigns from her profession as a lawyer. After Jimmy pleads with her not to leave him, she admits that she cannot be with him any longer as they are bad for everyone around them: “Jimmy... I have had the time of my life with you. But we are bad for everyone around us. Other people suffer because of us. Apart we’re okay, but together we’re poison.” (BCS, “Plan and Execution”) Furthermore, she confesses that she knew all along that Lalo Salamanca was alive even though Jimmy thought he had been killed, but that she was not ready to say it to Jimmy as she was afraid of losing him:

*Kim:* Jimmy... I thought... I thought it was a one-in-a-million chance that he’d come for us. I thought he would be caught if he did. And I told myself I was protecting you. But that’s not the truth. The reason I didn’t tell you was because I knew what you’d do.

*Jimmy:* Wh-what would I do?

*Kim:* You’d—you’d blame yourself. You’d fear for me. You’d want us to run and hide until you were sure I was safe. You would pull the plug on the scam, and then...and then, we’d break up. And I didn’t want that. Because I was having too much fun. (BCS, “Plan and Execution”)

It is only in that moment, when their actions have already led to severe consequences, that Kim realizes that their scamming for fun has gone too far, and her moral principles prevail over everything else – her previous life, relationship with Jimmy, and even her passion for law. On the other hand, the fact that Kim leaves him is what leads Jimmy to completely embrace the dark side of his personality, and to finally transform into the criminal lawyer from *Breaking Bad*.

However, the last few episodes of the series, which take place after the events in *Breaking Bad*, prove to be pivotal for the analysis of these two characters. Having deeply regretted her past actions and tormented by her guilty conscience, Kim confesses to everything she has done to Howard’s wife. On the other hand, when Jimmy is finally arrested while hiding under the name Gene Takavic, he once again plays the role of Saul Goodman, and manages to minimize his sentence, which should amount to almost ninety years in prison, to only seven years. However, when he finds out that Kim has already confessed

to her crimes, he decides to change his statement, confessing to everything he has done with Walter White, so that Kim would not be penalized as well:

I lied to the government about Kim Wexler. Uh, I fed them a load of BS about her involvement in Howard Hamlin's murder. I just... I just wanted her to come here today. I wanted her to hear this. So, yeah, I wasn't there when the meth was cooked. I wasn't there when it was sold. I didn't witness any of the murders, but I damn well knew it was happening. I was more than a willing participant, I was indispensable. I kept Walter White out of jail, I laundered his money, I lied for him, I conspired with him and I made millions! If he hadn't walked into my office that day, Walter White would've been dead or behind bars within a month. And Agent Schrader and Agent Gomez and a whole lot of other people would still be alive. Fact is, Walter White couldn't have done it without me. (BCS, "Saul Gone")

Apart from confessing to his crimes committed as Saul Goodman, Jimmy also admits getting his brother's malpractice insurance cancelled, due to which Chuck was no longer able to practice law, and which led to his suicide. When his counselor asks him why he mentioned that when "that wasn't even a crime", he replies: "Yeah, it was." Therefore, this moment marks Jimmy's final shift from Saul Goodman to his old self. While Saul Goodman takes pride in what he has achieved, only Jimmy remains to atone for the sins, which is clear after the judge addresses him as Mr. Goodman, and he corrects her: "The name's McGill. I'm James McGill." (BCS, "Saul Gone") During their last encounter after Jimmy is sentenced to eighty-six years in prison, it becomes clear that both Jimmy McGill and Kim Wexler have decided to pay the price for what they have done, and that they both, despite having sinned, possess the ability to sacrifice. While Kim Wexler sacrificed everything she had so that she would finally be at peace with herself, Jimmy McGill sacrificed for her.

**"I must be cruel only to be kind"**  
– Mike Ehrmantraut and Nacho Varga

Many critics have noted that *Better Call Saul* could have been two separate TV shows, one following the story of Jimmy McGill and his transformation into Saul Goodman, while the other one would provide the viewers with the background preceding Walter White's involvement in the drug cartel, as well as the war between the ruthless drug lord Gus Fring and the Salamanca family. Even though he has not been analyzed nearly as much as the protagonists of the two TV shows, Mike Ehrmantraut proves to be one of the most complex characters, whose actions constantly blur the boundaries between good and bad. A former police officer who used to take bribes as there was no other way to survive in a corrupt system, which is proved by the fact that his son got killed by two other police officers when he expressed reluctance to take his first bribe, Mike gradually enters the world of drug trafficking, working first as a bodyguard, and then as a private investigator and assassin for major narcotics distributors. However, unlike other characters involved in the drug trafficking business, motivated by greed and the urge to earn large amounts of money,

Mike is only there in order to provide for his daughter-in-law and his granddaughter, who struggle to make ends meet after the death of Mike's son Matt. One of the scenes in which the complexity of Mike's character is perfectly described is the conversation with a minor character, Daniel Wormald, a not very intelligent novice in the world of drug trafficking:

*Mike:* The lesson is, if you're gonna be a criminal, do your homework.

*Daniel Wormald:* Wait. I'm not a bad guy.

*Mike:* I didn't say you were a bad guy, I said you're a criminal.

*Daniel Wormald:* What's the difference?

*Mike:* I've known good criminals and bad cops. Bad priests. Honorable thieves. You can be on one side of the law or the other. But if you make a deal with somebody, you keep your word. You can go home today with your money and never do this again. But you took something that wasn't yours. And you sold it for a profit. You are now a criminal. Good one, bad one? That's up to you. (*BCS*, "Pimento")

In this now famous scene, Mike clearly elaborates on the difference between making illegal and immoral choices, and truly being a bad person, which is one of the main motifs in *Better Call Saul*. As it was stated earlier, like Jimmy McGill, Mike also enters the world of criminals as a result of his negative image of himself, but his motivation to remain there is quite different from Jimmy's. In season 1 episode 5, we find out that Mike not only feels responsible for the death of his son, but he also deeply regrets having made Matt take the bribe he was offered so that he would not get killed. Prior to Matt's murder, Mike had to confess to him that he also used to take bribes, and that he was no different from others in their police station in that sense. However, despite the fact that Matt did listen to him in the end, he got killed because of his reluctance, which made him seem unreliable to his colleagues. In a heart-wrenching confession to his daughter-in-law, Mike shows the remorse he feels for having "debased" his son:

Well I tried. I tried. But he wouldn't listen. My boy was stubborn. My boy was strong. And he was gonna get himself killed. So I told him... I told him I did it, too. That I was like Hoffman, getting by, and that's what you heard that night: me talking him down, him kicking and screaming until the fight went out of him. He put me up on a pedestal, and I had to show him that I was down in the gutter with the rest of 'em. I broke my boy...I was the only one that could get him to debase himself like that. I made him lesser. I made him like me. (*BCS*, "Five-O")

After his son gets killed, Mike takes revenge on his murderers, and decides that he will spend the rest of his life doing everything in his power to provide for Matt's wife and daughter. Therefore, what makes Mike morally superior to many other characters is the fact that he is not motivated by his own selfish needs like Walter White. He truly cares only about his family, and they are the only reason for his involvement in criminal actions. For that reason, many critics consider Mike the antithesis of Walter White, given that he truly is what Walter merely pretends to be – a person who sincerely loves their family and sacrifices for them. In one of the very few academic articles focused on Mike's character, Gibson and Gibson (2022: 61) argue that even though many

of Mike's actions are obviously illegal, "his reasoning for doing them is generally admirable". In season 5 episode 8, when he ends up with Jimmy McGill in the middle of a desert, he opens up about his reasons for taking part in criminal activities, and not giving up in difficult circumstances:

I have people. I have people waiting for me. They don't know what I do, they never will. They're protected, but I do what I do so they can have a better life and if I live or if I die it really doesn't make a difference to me as long as they have what they need. So when it's my time to go, I will go knowing I did everything I could for them. Now, you ask me how I keep going? That's how. (BCS, "Bagman")

Furthermore, another characteristic that makes Mike much different from other characters is the fact that he neither takes pleasure in the actions he performs, nor does he resort to violence unless he really has to. As Clipsham states (2022: 5), unlike Jimmy and Kim who enjoy "scamming for fun", Mike will only "lie, deceive, or scheme when doing so is the only way for him to get a specific benefit". On top of that, even though he is also occasionally hired as an assassin, Mike never kills other people unless it is absolutely necessary. When one of the drug dealers, Nacho Varga, hires him to kill his boss, the ruthless drug addict Tuco Salamanca, so that he would not find out about his side business, Mike does his best to solve the matter in a way that would not involve murdering Tuco. After he performs a scam and gets severely beaten by Tuco, but managing to get him arrested, Nacho Varga tells him that he "went a long way to not pull that trigger" (BCS, "Gloves"). A couple of episodes later, after Mike steals money from one of Salamanca trucks, Nacho immediately realizes that it was him, because the witness was not killed in the process:

I think it was you. They left the driver hogtied, not a mark on him. Anyone in the game would have capped him but this driver, he's still breathing. I thought to myself "who's the guy who'd rip off a couple of hundred thousand in drug money and leave a witness? Who's the guy who won't pull the trigger?" (BCS, "Nailed")

Finally, Mike often takes severe measures only to prevent something even worse from happening. In that sense, the justification for his choices is reminiscent of Shakespeare's Hamlet who, after killing Polonius in act 3, scene 4, exclaims that he "must be cruel only to be kind":

I do repent; but heaven hath pleas'd it so  
To punish me with this, and this with me,  
That I must be their scourge and minister.  
I will bestow him, and will answer well  
The death I gave him. So again good night  
I must be cruel only to be kind.  
Thus bad begins and worse remains behind.  
(Shakespeare 1996: 697)

One of Mike's decisions to act cruelly in order to prevent an even more disastrous outcome is shown at the end of season 4, when he is forced to kill Werner Ziegler, the German engineer hired by his boss, Gus Fring, to construct

a laboratory for producing methamphetamine. After Ziegler accidentally reveals some information regarding the construction to Fring's enemy, Lalo Salamanca, Mike realizes that he has to die one way or another. In order to prevent Fring from torturing him and killing him in a far crueller manner, Mike decides to murder Ziegler by himself. In one of the most brilliant scenes from the show, it is obvious how difficult it is for Mike to do it. This becomes clear even to Ziegler who, stating that "there are so many stars visible in New Mexico" indicates that he will move further away from Mike, so that he could shoot him from the distance: "I will walk out there...to get a better look" (BCS, "Winner").

Besides the fact that he sacrifices for his family, and that he is capable of compassion, what proves to be the key to Mike's redemption despite his immoral actions is his confession that he deeply regrets the path he has taken. In one of the flashbacks from the last episode of the show, when Jimmy McGill asks him what he would do if he had a time machine, Mike replies that he would go back to the time when he took his first bribe (BCS, "Saul Gone"). Therefore, Mike is painfully aware of both the fact that he should have done everything differently, and that there is no way back. As he says to Jimmy after what happened to them in the desert, our choices lead us inexorably to the consequences of our actions:

Look. We all make our choices. And those choices, they put us on a road. Sometimes those choices seem small, but they put you on the road. You think about getting off... but eventually, you're back on it. And the road we're on led us out to the desert, everything that happened there and straight back to where we are right now. And nothing—nothing—can be done about that. (BCS, "Bad Choice Road")

Another character whose fate proves that one cannot get off "the bad choice road" is Nacho Varga. Despite being a drug dealer, Nacho is also one of the characters whose willingness to sacrifice for his loved ones proves that not all criminals are heartless. The best side of Nacho's personality is shown through his care for his father, who has nothing to do with the drug cartel, and only runs a family business. On the other hand, Nacho also acts immorally on some occasions in order to protect his father, proving that, like Mike Ehrmantraut, he sometimes has to be cruel only to be kind. For example, when Don Hector, the patriarch of the Salamanca family, tells him that he wants to involve his father in his business, Nacho pleads with him not to do it:

*Nacho:* Don Hector, my father is a simple man. He's not in the business.

*Hector:* You will teach him.

*Nacho:* Don Hector, please.

*Hector:* Don't worry. I'll take good care of papi. He'll make money. A lot more than with his little sewing machine. (BCS, "Off Brand")

When Don Hector refuses to spare his father, Nacho switches his heart medications for sugar pills, due to which Don Hector suffers a stroke and remains disabled. Therefore, despite being a supporting character, Nacho has a very complex personality, and like the other characters we have previously discussed, challenges the dichotomy between good and evil. In his article "Finding

the Good in Nacho", Rocha (2022: 220) argues that Nacho is a character "who is unabashedly in the middle of things, and yet remains morally redeemable":

Nacho challenges moral theories that require us to develop a fully moral character before we can be considered good. Instead, Nacho is quite often a bad person in one moment, a good person in another moment, and a person whose morality is nearly impossible to determine in many other moments. Nacho shows the complications that lie within moral life. (Rocha 2022: 220)

Finally, Nacho's death is also one of the reasons why viewers cannot help but sympathize with him. Caught in the middle of the conflict between Gus Fring and the Salamanca family, Nacho realizes that his only way out of the difficult situation he has got himself into is death, and commits suicide in front of everyone, having previously confessed to what he did to Don Hector. However, it is obvious that Nacho does not only commit suicide in order to avoid being tortured and murdered by the members of the cartel, he also does it in order to ensure that his father remains safe, and the only person he can trust is Mike Ehrmantraut:

*Nacho:* My dad. I need to know that he will be safe.

*Gus:* If you are true to your word, there will be no reason for anyone to harm your father.

*Nacho:* You are not the one that I need to hear it from.

*Mike:* Your dad's gonna be okay.

*Nacho:* How do you know?

*Mike:* Because anyone who goes after him is gonna have to come through me. (BCS, "Rock and Hard Place")

Unlike Gus Fring, whose word means nothing to him, Nacho holds Mike in high regard and knows that he will keep his word. Therefore, even though Mike and Nacho do not seem to have a lot in common at first, the two characters share the same devotion to their families and the readiness to sacrifice for their loved ones.

## Conclusion

In this analysis, our aim was to shed light on the complexity of the four characters from two different storylines, and show how they all, despite being morally ambiguous, share the same willingness to sacrifice. The show provides a very realistic portrayal of various characters involved in criminal actions, but also capable of noble deeds, challenging the dichotomy between good and evil. For that reason, all these characters are remarkably realistic, which is considered to be one of the most important factors that attract the audience to them.

When it comes to Jimmy McGill, we can say that his character is so complex and his identity so fluid that it was difficult to include all the aspects of his personality in this paper. However, from the examples that we used, it can be noticed that Jimmy epitomizes different, even opposing characteristics. He is a con man and a caring brother, a criminal lawyer and a fighter for justice, he

loves his family deeply but he keeps disappointing everyone around him. Nevertheless, his final transition from Saul Goodman into Jimmy McGill proves to be pivotal for the interpretation of his personality. Saul is “gone” as it is suggested in the title of the last episode, along with everything else he ever had<sup>4</sup>, but the fact that Jimmy is still there, ready to sacrifice for the person he loves, makes it impossible for the viewers not to sympathize with him. In a slightly different manner, Jimmy’s partner, Kim Wexler, also sacrifices everything she had in life in order to atone for her past sins, and thus proving that her moral principles have always been stronger than Jimmy’s, even though she did enjoy performing scams with him.

Finally, the characters of Mike Ehrmantraut and Nacho Varga both get involved in the drug trafficking business due to different circumstances, and though their decision to get involved in such activities can be judged, they both show how much they care for their loved ones, and they sacrifice either so that they would have a better life, or that they would be protected. Therefore, this show is very successful in demonstrating the complexity of human nature, as well as the way in which various social circumstances shape human beings, creating “good criminals and bad cops, bad priests and honorable thieves”.

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### „IMAM LJUDE KOJI ME ČEKAJU”: ISKUPLJUJUĆA MOĆ LJUBAVI I POŽRTVOVANJA U SERIJI *BOLJE POZOVITE SOLA*

#### Rezime

Nakon velikog uspeha serije *Čista hemija*, njen prednastavak, *Bolje pozovite Sola*, imao je ozbiljan zadatak da ispuni očekivanja obožavalaca i kritičara koji su željno iščekivali razvoj priče jednog od najzanimljivijih likova, Sola Gudmana. Ipak, zahvaljujući izuzetnoj kompleksnosti i upečatljivim likovima, ova serija postala je gotovo jednako popularna i cenjena kao prethodna. Jedan od razloga za tako pozitivne kritike jesu likovi čija složenost pomera granice dobra i zla. Cilj ovog rada jeste analiza tih likova, sa posebnim osvrtom na njihove dobre osobine, zahvaljujući kojima se razlikuju od brojnih drugih likova. Posebnu pažnju posvetićemo glavnom liku, Džimiju Mekgilu, njegovoj partnerki Kim Veksler, kao i dvojici likova koji su učestvuju u aktivnostima narko-mafije. Kao što ćemo prikazati, ono što je svim ovim likovima zajedničko jeste činjenica da su svi oni, bez obzira na to što su uključeni u kriminalne poslove, izuzetno požrtvo-vani i posvećeni onima koje vole, što predstavlja ključ njihovog iskupljenja.

*Ključne reči:* *Bolje pozovite Sola*, Džimi Mekgil, moralno neodređeni likovi, ljubav, požrtvo-vanost, iskupljenje

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