

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

Breaking Bad (2008 – 2013) is an American Television Series created by Vince Gilligan that tells the story of a chemistry teacher, Walter Hartwell White, who discovers that he has lung cancer and will not live a long life. To provide finances for his family and pay for his medical treatments, he takes the shortcut by getting himself into the methamphetamine business. He is partnered with his former student, Jesse Pinkman, who introduces him to the world of methamphetamine business. Walter transforms from a kind-hearted chemistry teacher to a ruthless drug kingpin. His reason for getting himself into the methamphetamine business is to ensure his family's finances after he passes away. This shows Walter's moral complexity. He does criminality, but somehow it can be justified.

Moral complexity refers to the actions of a character that cannot be considered as good or bad, because somehow it is justified by their circumstances (Favaro, 2021: 3). Another example of how Walter has moral complexity can be seen in the series when he was forced to murder someone because if he did not commit the murder, he would be the one who get murdered. Walter, through his commissive speech acts, like "*I'll do the rest (the murder).*", had always reflected his moral complexity.

The moral complexity, as shown by the character Walter White, can be analyzed using the speech act theory by John R. Searle (1969) to understand Walter White's antihero traits. The commissive speech act theory by Searle (1969) mainly focuses on the words that are spoken by the speaker, which are meant to commit the speaker or the group of speakers to do certain actions in the future. Walter White, through his commissive speech acts, shows that he has an antihero trait.

The character Walter White has been analyzed in several studies. These include studies by Peters (2015), Dimiyati (2016), and Jati (2018). Many of the studies regarding the series analyzed the main character, Walter White, from various aspects, such as his verbal and psychological needs. However, there is a lack of studies that focus on Walter White from his linguistic aspect, which contributes to depicting his antihero traits. The main character's antihero traits are highly recommended to be analyzed through his linguistic perspective, as many speeches and dialogues can be analyzed in this series. Therefore, I intend to prove that Walter White's speech acts can represent his antihero traits.

1.2. Previous Studies

I found fifteen studies that provide considerable insight for conducting this research. These previous studies can be divided into three topics: studies that focus on analyzing Walter White as the object of research, studies that focus on

analyzing the series *Breaking Bad* as the object of research, and studies that focus on how commissive speech acts are used in analyzing literary works.

The first six studies focus on Walter White as a character being analyzed. Christiansen (2017) researched Walter as an antihero using an evolutionary approach. The research aims to investigate the traits and appeal of the morally ambiguous protagonist of the series *Breaking Bad*. This research mentions that the Antiheroes are characters torn psychologically but driven by obligation. This perspective can be used to help us understand the traits of an antihero like Walter White. Walter wants to live a longer life, or at least a more meaningful life. Walter wants to do his best to provide finances for his family. Although his decisions are contradictory to what society considers good deeds. This is the moral complexity that Walter had throughout the series. He tried to do good deeds for himself, for his partner, and for his family; however, he did something that related to criminality.

Dimiyati (2016) discussed the topic of Walter White's motivation. This research focuses on how certain motivations can affect Walter's decisions. This research aims to reveal Walter White's motivation in starting his drug business. The three main parts of Walter's motivations are valence, instrumentality, and expectancy, which are defined as the preference towards outcome, the relationship between two outcomes, and the belief that an act will be followed by an outcome in particular, respectively (Vroom: 1964). This research mentions that Walter started his drug business because he thought it seemed preferable rather than telling his family about his lung cancer, which could become a financial problem

for his family after he was gone. Examining these three main parts helps the reader understand what Walter White's motivations were in starting his drug business in the first place.

Jati (2018) researched Walter White's shifting characterization using the structuralism theory. He analyzes Walter White as a part of the story, not as a human being with social interaction with other characters. This research aims to gain a deeper understanding of how Walter's characterization shifts through the scope of structuralism. This research mentions the terms hero and antihero, which concludes that Walter has these two traits at the same time. In other words, he has good and bad traits at the same time.

Arfianto (2018) studied Walter White through the scope of the Hierarchy of Needs by Maslow (1943). This research focuses on how Walter's actions and decisions were affected by his hierarchy of needs. This research aims to explain how Walter fulfills his needs. In other words, how he starts the drug business contributes to fulfilling his needs that perhaps were not fulfilled before. This includes the needs of physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. The writer concludes that humans will always find ways to fulfill their needs, and once humans find the ways, they will do anything to achieve their needs.

Peters (2015) conducted research about Walter's masculinity. This research focuses on Walter's relationship with the characters that were close to or often interacted with him: his business adversaries, his wife, Skyler, and his

partner in crime, Jesse Pinkman. By using the speech act theory by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), this research aims to reveal the complexity of Walter's masculinity. This research concludes that Walter's masculinity is considered a complex concept due to its inconsistent features throughout the series. The complexity of Walter White's masculinity plays a notable role in placing Walter White as an antihero protagonist in the American television drama series.

Akan (2015) discussed research that addresses Walter White's change in how he communicates with people before and after he realizes his power. This research focuses on how Walter's utterances, gestures, and tone change from time to time in certain situations as he deals with people. For instance, when he does not have any power in his workplace, The Car Wash, he simply avoids confrontation with his boss when his boss tells Walter to do the job he does not want to do. However, in the last season of the series, Walter eventually has power where he is the owner of his own meth business, he intimidates one of his rivals. He uses his previous acts as his weapon, in which he killed his late boss, to intimidate his rival. He does not use any demanding or coercive words, only a calm and slow tone. He succeeds in making his rivals want to work for him.

The next group of studies focuses on the series *Breaking Bad*, which is analyzed using several theories and concepts. Đurić (2018) studied *Breaking Bad* using several concepts, which are neoliberalism and self-reflexivity. This research aims to explain a statement to not only pay attention to the plot of the story but also to the construction of the story world, its characters, and the relations between the series' narrative and the real world. The findings of this research, from the

neoliberalism's point of view, are that *Breaking Bad* functions as a critique and resistance to the terrors of neoliberalism in America. The other finding is that Walter White's career in his meth business can be said as occupational choices in the terms of neoliberalism. Then, the last finding of this research is that *Breaking Bad* serves as a narrative with complexity according to the concept of self-reflexivity.

Wille (2014) researched how *Breaking Bad* is considered a male-centered drama. This research shows that Walter, as the main character, attempts to be a father, a husband, a provider of finances for his family, and a man. To be a father, he strives to be a good father to Walter Jr. To be a husband, he tries to dominate and assert his wife. Building his own meth business is a sign of him trying to be a provider of finances for his family. Then, he dies alone in a meth lab after murdered a dozen of Jack Welker's men and Jack Welker himself is a sign of Walter tries to be a man. The writer states that money, power, and masculinity are essentially symbiotic in *Breaking Bad*. For example, when Walter loses his money to Jack, he tries to take it, not the money, but Jack's life. This is also his attempt to gain his power and masculinity back as a lead chemist and as the former owner of the meth business.

Pond (2019) conducted research that talks about emasculation in some characters of the series *Breaking Bad*, including Walter, Hank, and Gus. These three characters undergo emasculation in the series. Walter gets lung cancer and cannot live any longer. Hank is paralyzed due to the shootout he had with 'the cousins' from the Mexican cartel. Max, Gus's lover, is murdered by Hector

Salamanca, who is partnered up with Don Eladio, Gus's rival. This research talks about how these three characters dealt with emasculation. In the research, these three characters use violence in physical and verbal form to gain their masculinity back. Walter after gets terminal lung cancer he starts the meth business and starts to be a powerful, demanding, and coercing drug kingpin. Hank when he supposedly is still paralyzed, his strength surprisingly comes back when he got closer in Gus's meth empire investigation. Gus takes revenge on Don Eladio and Hector Salamanca by killing their entire family and their entire business associates. This research shows that they do so unconsciously, caused by their inner self to gain their masculinity back.

Clark (2014) conducted research on the topic of how the series *Breaking Bad* revises the mythic Western narrative. Walter is unsuccessfully becoming a western hero which depicted in the final episode of the series where Walter ends up escaping his town and become a ghost to everyone until he dies alone in a meth lab. These factors are considered contradictory to the concept of a Western hero and the mythic Western narrative. In the last, the writer states that *Breaking Bad* partakes in a movement in the Western genre that deals with the lasting pain effects of violence and conquest as well as the cultural crisis of masculinity.

Lang (2024) did the most recent research on *Breaking Bad*. The research focuses on Walter's toxicity. From the research, the series contains nuanced explorations of masculinity, power dynamics, and societal narratives. *Breaking Bad* is considered a portrayal of white masculinity within the context of the American Dream. Therefore, Walter's journey from a chemistry teacher to a drug

kingpin is considered a cautionary tale. The writer also adds that the amount of screen time where Walter attempts to defeat his non-white rival, Gus Fring, is more focused on the concept of Walter's masculinity rather than the concept of the oppressed, like when Walter tries to oppress and control his wife. The writer tries to convey the message that many researchers are only focused on white masculinity without even considering other aspects, such as those who are oppressed, due to Walter's attempt to gain his masculinity back.

Four previous studies represent the topic of how commissive speech acts can be applied in analyzing literary works. Husain (2018) researched the play *Death of a Salesman* (1949) using commissive speech acts. This research focuses on how commissive speech acts are uttered by the characters in the play. The research aims to find which types of commissive speech acts are used the most by the characters. Its finding shows that guarantee, promise, and threat are the most frequently used by the characters. This research shows that commissive speech acts can be used to analyze literary works.

Devi and Degaf (2021) researched the movie *Knives Out* (2019) using the commissive speech acts theory. The research focuses on how the commissive speech acts are uttered by the main character. The finding of this research is that the most frequently used by the main character is refusal. The kind of speech acts that are used in this movie are the illocutionary act. This research proves that commissive speech acts can be used to analyze movies and films.

Azka and Candria (2024) researched the movie *Encanto* (2021). This research mainly focuses on how the movie characters, Alma Madrigal and Mirabel Madrigal, use kinds of commissive speech acts. The research aims to study which kinds of commissive speech acts are often used by the movie characters and the reasons why they uttered those commissive speech acts. The finding of this research is that these two characters use commissive speech acts, particularly guaranteeing, to serve the purpose of asserting their commitment to future actions. This research proves that the function of commissive speech acts is to assert a commitment, by the speaker, to certain future actions.

Rachman (2021) conducted research on the movie *Hobbs and Shaw* (2019). This research focuses on how the main characters, Luke Hobbs and Deckard Shaw, include commissive speech acts in their utterances. The research aims to study how the main characters use commissive speech acts and how their commissive speech acts are considered felicitous. The finding of this research includes the form of commissive speech acts that are used by the characters and the felicity conditions in commissive speech acts. According to the research, the characters often use the forms *'must'*, *'will'*, *'can'*, *'could'*, *'want'*, and *'be gonna'*. These forms, if included in a sentence with a certain context, can be considered as commissive speech acts. Whereas the felicity conditions in commissive speech acts include the speaker's physical and mental condition, contain a purpose, contain a commitment, give profit or disadvantage to the hearer, can be fulfilled perfectly, the speaker does the act sincerely, the speaker aware that it is his obligation, contain a normal language, contain a clear

pragmatics studies. These 9 (nine) felicity conditions are as narrow as the five main felicity conditions: the general condition, the content condition, the preparatory conditions, the sincerity condition, and the essential condition. This research proves that commissive speech acts must also be felicitous.

These fifteen previous studies show a lack of studies regarding Walter's speech act that contributes to his antihero traits. Nevertheless, the antihero traits analysis of Walter White has been conducted in several studies by researchers before this. However, there is no obvious proof that a character's speech act contributes to his antihero traits. Thus, this research tries to address the topic of how a character's speech act contributes to his antihero traits.

1.3. Research Questions

To analyze Walter White's antihero traits, I came up with two main questions to gain strong signs of Walter White's antihero traits, as follows.

1. What kinds of Commissive Speech Acts did Walter use?
2. How do the Factors reflected in Walter's Commissive Speech Acts represent His Moral Complexity?

1.4. Purposes of the Study

The purpose of the study is to analyze Walter White's antihero traits in Vince Gilligan's *Breaking Bad* (2008 – 2013) using Searle's commissive speech acts

(1969). This study aims to investigate Walter White's antihero traits through his commissive speech acts.

1.5. Significance of the Study

This study develops the application of commissive speech act theory in examining a character's antihero traits by giving a model of analysis on how commissive speech act theory can show antihero traits of a character in a literary work. In addition, this study intends to give references and deeper comprehension to the readers about antihero traits in a literary work and how this phenomenon can be examined from a linguistic perspective.