

“I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it. I was alive”

It’s easy to simplify Walter’s character as just an egomaniac on a power trip in retrospect but I’m going to try looking deeper into the core of Walter’s psychology and what drove him to a lot of his decision making throughout the story.

One of the core aspects of any kind of psychological analysis is how much of a person’s behavior is defined by inherent traits and how much of it is from their surrounding environment, and trying to connect those pieces together to create a more complete profile. Walter is a pretty good example of this, exploring concepts of nature vs nurture pretty fluidly throughout the 5 seasons of the show.

By the nature of his concept, he should be a “good -> bad” character, seemingly being all nurture, but there’s clearly much more than that going on here. Throughout the first 3 - 4 seasons, the source of Walter’s pride is constantly subverted and explored. Is it just a part of him that’s been repressed and if so what’s the source of it? How else has it been depicted. A lot of his bitterness can be connected to his past with Gray Matter, but his pride stems far before that, being implied to being exactly why Walter left in the first place, being insecure about his place and worth when compared to how rich Gretchen’s family was along with Elliot, feeling like he couldn’t contribute the same, and instead of communicating this, he leaves. Now obviously you could just say it’s ego but there’s more to this, which I’ll get to in a bit.

So immediately it’s made pretty clear that Walt’s ego has plagued him for a large part of his life, well before the show began and it only really gets worse as the show progresses, and you can argue that Walter never truly changed at all, but moreso tried to become the ideal image of what

he thought he was. I'll get into more detail about this in a bit because I want to keep a bit of a structure here.

From this you could easily make the mistake of just saying that ego is his unconscious nature that he's been repressing and that's not necessarily the worst interpretation. I would, however, recommend rewatching Walter's monologue in season 4 about his dying father. On a surface level, this is the source of Walter's fear and why he hates what "Walter White" represents and it pretty much shows the "birth" of Heisenberg in a sense (I don't really like separating the two identities but you'll see me doing that a lot because Walter himself does this a lot so I might as well start now lol). In season 2, Walter talks about how he doesn't feel the fear he felt before anymore and how he sleeps just fine at night ever since his diagnosis (which itself is pretty disturbing for a number of reasons that I hopefully don't need to go through), but the point is that the traits that define his "ideal" self are seemingly caricatures of masculinity. The provider, strong, never shows weakness, etc. The reason this is Walter's ideal, imaginary self is because Walter never really had a father figure who could teach him otherwise. All he saw was his dying father (and I'll show the monologue and highlight some key parts of it to consider), and all he knew was that he was absolutely terrified of becoming that. So it it's pretty ironic that he claims that he's without fear when he adopts the persona of Heisenberg, because Heisenberg is quite literally DEFINED by fear. Heisenberg, or essentially the repressed ego and his bitterness and all these other factors, is fundamentally driven by fear.

"My father died when I was 6. You knew that, right? He had Huntington's disease, it destroys portions of the brain, leads to dementia, it's just a nasty disease. It's genetic. Terrified my mother that I might have it, so they ran tests on me when I was a kid, but I came up clean. My father fell very ill when I was 4 or 5. He spent a lot of time in the hospital. **My mother would tell me so many stories about my father**. She would talk about him all the time. I knew about his personality, how he treated people. I even knew how he liked his steaks cooked. Medium rare; just like you. I knew things about my father. I had a lot of information. **It's because people would tell me these things. They would paint this picture of my father for me.** And I always pretended that was who I saw too. Who I remembered. But it was a lie. In truth, I only have one real, actual memory of my father. It must have been right before he died. My mother would take me to the hospital to visit him. And I remember the smell in there, the chemicals. It was as if they used up every single cleaning product they could find in a 50-mile radius. Like they didn't want you smelling the sick people. There was this stench of Lysol and bleach. I mean, you could just feel it coating your lungs. Anyway, there lying on the bed, is my father. He's all twisted up. And my mom, she puts me on her lap. She's sitting on the bed next to him, so I can take a good look at him. But really, he just scares me. And he's looking right at me, but I can't even be sure that he knows who I am. And your grandmother is talking, trying to be cheerful, you know, as she does, but 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.** Anyway, that is the only real memory that I have of my father. **I don't want you to think of me the way I was last night. I don't want that to be the memory you have of me when I'm gone**."

These bolded lines are the key, important details in this monologue (which isn't to say that the rest of it isn't important, but not for what I'm about to say.

Walter doesn't ultimately believe that people truly exist without other people to tell their stories. He believes that your entire sense of self is solely based on how other people perceive you and the memories that they construct with or without you. Walter had a nearly completely understanding of his father's personality and that likely would have been enough had he not personally seen him. His own memory of his father tainted his entire perception of him. It didn't matter how amazing he seemed from everyone else's stories. He exists as someone different to each person, and to Walter he was nothing but a withered husk that could barely even be called human.

Notice the specific language Walter uses here: "[l]ike there was nothing in him". This is precisely why he tries to change things. Walter is absolutely terrified of the void, of being nothing because then it means that all he'll have is the stories of others, something that is almost entirely out of his control beyond his actions. This is why Walter spends almost his entire life trying to manage the perceptions of others about himself. He works two jobs and slaves away at jobs that he hates and believes are undeserving for someone of his caliber, not just to take care of his family, but also because it projects the idea of the reliable and hard-working father/husband. He doesn't drink too much, never smokes, and represses any and all his desires in order to keep that appearance. Even when he gets disrespected or mocked, he still keeps up that appearance because he knows that that's all that will remain after he's gone. The problem is that the man he's projecting, the image he's constructed around himself, is the embodiment of all the traits he assigns to his father, the memory he hates. Essentially, Walter White as we know him from the start of the show is nothing more than Walter's reimagining of his own father, and his perception of the man he is (compared to how his family sees him for example) is tainted because of his memory of his father. He hates the man he is but he feels defeated by life. His aspirations didn't pay off and he's merely stuck in a seemingly endless cycle of stagnancy and mediocrity, but he keeps at it to support his family, with the hopes that when he dies he'll be remembered fondly and not like how he remembered his dad.

The reason he hates what he is, is because, like I said, he's lost his huge aspirations that he had, the spark that drove him to think that his house would just be a starter house, a jumping pad for something far bigger. In a clearer perspective, he lost his sense of self. Walter by the beginning of the show is literally like his father, like I said before, a husk of a man with nothing inside him. A living void if that makes more sense, covered up by the fragments of a personality that make up the identity, Walter White. The only fragment that exists forever repressed is his pride and especially his fear.

He gets completely shaken up when he finds out about his cancer diagnosis and even spends some time just watching matches burn up in his hand, literally pondering about the inevitability of his fate, and he desires to change things. He becomes "awake", no longer being willing to stay as a void with no spark, no real self. He essentially tries to chase after the self he lost, to become someone new, to quite literally become his own man/person, based around his ideal man, which is itself based on his observations of people around him, especially the likes of

Hank. Hank is someone Walt completely envies and admires in equal measure and much of his masculine behavior comes off as a more extreme imitation of Hank's own behavior, believing that Hank is more respected by his family than he is and essentially trying to shape his ideal self after Hank. This is precisely why Walter seems perfectly comfortable claiming that Hank is twice the man he is.

Now you might be following along, but there is a contradiction here, and it's about why Walter goes to such lengths to keep his family from knowing the truth. Obviously there's the legal perspective here where he doesn't want to be sent to prison, but it's also exactly because of what I described before. Walter is still too obsessed with how other people view him because he doesn't think he has anything resembling an existence without their stories and narratives and memories, so he continually manipulates, separates the ideal image of himself that he's building from the fragile mask he's been keeping up for nearly two decades into two different identities: Walter White and Heisenberg, and he will often flip between casting one fragment into his internal void and summoning another, in order to keep the status quo, but he does this while also slowly trying to change their perspectives of him.

He beats Hank at gambling, he gets Flynn to drink a lot of alcohol (it is an ego battle, but this ego is itself based in a lack of security in his sense of self), shaving his head, growing a beard, wearing the hat, etc.

He continually takes steps to integrate the two fragments/masks together into one, more complete person. This itself is partly what makes Walter such a complex and compelling character, seeing him oscillate between these different extremes in different scenarios. Walter's the guy who will one second treat Jesse like he's a son and another second put him down like a master does to his slave or like how he would treat a disobedient dog.

You can track a lot of Walter's development with this idea of constructing the self in how he tries to integrate his fatherly nature as Walter into his partnership with Jesse, seeing him as an extension of his family (along with an asset to control). This also gets further elaborated on with the blowfish analogy which connects not only to Jesse's own deconstruction of the self, but Walter's as well. He projects his personality to such an extreme that no matter how cartoonish it seems it at least makes an impression and puts an impact onto people. This then connects back to his "Stay out of my territory" moment among several others.

Season 4 is where the boundaries between Walter White and Heisenberg start blurring as Skylar becomes far more involved in his drug schemes, being responsible for him getting the car wash to launder his drug money and even reigniting their sexual relationship through their hedonistic dive into hell, but also the blend of distancing between both his family and Jesse, the family on the other side.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31Voz1H40zI&t=49s

0:46 for the specific timestamp.

This is perhaps one of Walter's most iconic peaks in the series and often one of his most oversimplified. I believe that his line, "Who are you talking to right now" is incredibly important because it's a genuine question. Walter is affirming his identity as Heisenberg and essentially taking the first steps to fully imprint his nature as Heisenberg onto Skylar, so that she remembers him that way, but the reason he asks this first is because he literally doesn't know who she's talking to. Does she see him as Walter White or as Heisenberg, and how does she see both? Walter believes human beings exist through how they exist through others so he essentially uses Skylar as a mirror so that he can experience himself through her eyes. This is also why he briefly turns around after saying "I am the one who knocks", almost in regret, because he isn't just regretful of potentially scaring her, but feels scared of himself and what he's becoming, which is why he attempts to apologize and explain himself to her later only to realize she left. Walter has come to internalize the idea that men don't show weakness and provide for their families even if they're feared or even hated, that it literally prevents him from properly opening up to his wife who literally just doesn't want him to die and to implode their entire family.

Season 5 is essentially Walt's attempt to fully disregard the Walter White fragments into his void. He acts virtually the same both with his family and with people like Jesse and Mike and manipulates both sides equally to further his agendas. He's become so driven by his flawed views of masculinity (views that he knows aren't helping his family's perception of them because Flynn outright tells him that Walter's lack of communication and "fakeness" wasn't really impressing his family, just pushing them away) that he's actually become capable of listening to the news about the little boy he caused the death of with his train operation, showing seemingly no remorse whatsoever for the multiple people in prison that he killed and even playing with his daughter while the news goes over their deaths, etc. Walter has even locked us, the audience, out of his mind by this point and all we can see of his headspace is what he's willing to tell us. Things like how he's in the empire business, about how the meth cannot stop flowing, etc. We only really see back into his mind when he gets his second cancer diagnosis, and he's back into the same confrontation with death, realizing that when he dies he'll solely be remembered by the image he's projected. That, along with the fact that all the people who he wanted to remember him properly have decided to leave the business entirely or got killed by him like Jesse, Mike, etc. or they are terrified of him and hate him like Skylar. So Walter leaves the business and tries to go back to just his normal life, though obviously differently from before as he's simply changed too much to just completely bring back to fragments of Walter White, but everything comes crumbling down in Ozymandias.

Ozymandias exists as a complete fracturing of every single piece of his identity as Heisenberg. His empire, the money he made, and the power he's attained all taken away from him, and he's gone back to what he was before: meek, weak, and almost entirely without control, except now he's forced to see the consequences of his actions to the point where even his family want absolutely nothing to do with him and in Granite State, he's in a state of absolute nothingness, except now he has almost nobody whatsoever to remember him. He'll merely be remembered as that monster and then forgotten, never truly seen, and that's why he begs that guy to stay with him, even offering up $10,000 just to play a game of cards. He begs Flynn to take his money, one last attempt at making things right so that he'll be remembered as more than just a

caricature and a failure of a human being, so that at least he has something to his existence. He becomes more than a void because his existence incorporates this memory of his family, but of course Flynn rejects this and even claims that Walter should just die, cutting him off entirely, and Walter seemingly gives up, completely reverting back to the persona he hated, until he sees this:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rMlNl0fKwxQ

People tend to see this as just Walter's ego coming out but there's actually much more here, because remember Walter's ego is at an all-time low even in Felina, willingly making himself look worse in order to get what he wants and seemingly having much more clarity.

This moment is the start of this clarity, and it really comes here:

"Whatever he became, the sweet, kind, brilliant man we once new; he's gone"

He comes to realize that he can't go back to pretending to be Walter White because that self is gone, irreparably changed and simply can't be reverse. The status quo has been changed too much for things to be reversed, and so he decides to finish what he started and go out on his own terms.

And that brings things back to "I did it for me". I've seen some fascinating interpretations of this moment, and the most interesting one I've seen is that this moment of Walter's clarity is the moment when he fully constructs his identity and becomes a real person, not the blowfish, but a full person not merely hiding behind the mask. He essentially moves beyond his fear of his father's fate and starts truly living as himself, and while I do like this interpretation, I believe it is still somewhat incorrect (albeit on the right track).

Walter's motives often get simplified down to being purely selfish, especially in retrospect, but Walter definitely does have an altruistic side to him (even if the core of that altruism goes back to his own selfish fears and image issues). Walter absolutely did do what he did to make enough money for his family, but he doesn't mention that to Skylar precisely because he wants to tell her what would make her feel better, what would put her at peace. So Walter puts the image of himself as the selfish monster who ruined the family for his own desire to feel alive and his ego, when that isn't necessarily entirely true. I believe the first key piece of evidence for this is that he cuts her off mid-sentence. Now this isn't to say that what he's saying isn't true. It definitely is, but it isn't the WHOLE truth, just one part of it. That altruistic part of him was entirely left out because even in this moment Walter is still reliant on her memories of him in order to keep existing, albeit he has lost the ego and fragility that he had been plagued by before.

Walt's full construction of the self only really happens right before he's about to die, after he saves Jesse and does everything he set out to do. Getting money for his family from Gretchen and Elliot, killing Jack's gang, saving Jesse and rectifying his mistake, etc. etc. And it's because of this full construction of his self that Walter is able to die satisfied, despite being all alone at the moment of his death, surrounded only by his baby blue.

Walter only really gains the clarity of what it means to be someone near the end of his life, when it's far FAR too late. Walter was scared of the perceptions of others because he couldn't really control them and so acted in a way where he tried to get a positive perception from everyone he met, whether it's by acting meek and reliable to his family or acting dominant and aggressive to other people in the drug business or a mix of both with Jesse, but what he never realized until the end is that everyone is empty when they start out. The connections you make and the experiences you have are what make you a full person. It's not solely how people remember remember you but how you use those memories and perceptions to break free of those chains and truly be your own self with your own beliefs, motivations, etc. It's only really at the end when Walter isn't trying to appease literally everyone that he feels that weight off his chest and is able to just die, knowing he's achieved what he wanted and become the person he wanted to be.

This isn't a full analysis as there's a lot of different layers and details to Walt that would make this simply too long, but this is mainly towards the psychological motives behind his journey through the lens of his identity.