

**“I Save Me”: Gender, Agency, and Power in *Better Call Saul***

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# **“I SAVE ME”: GENDER, AGENCY, AND POWER IN *BETTER CALL SAUL***

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
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## ABSTRACT

Historically, women on television have been portrayed in wife and mother roles, making them a foil to their husbands, but never the main focal point of the show. These characters stay on the sidelines, without being given truly original storylines where they are allowed to drive their own narratives. During the first season of *Better Call Saul*, Kim Wexler is a supporting character, without any storylines that aren't linked to Jimmy McGill. Jimmy often treats Kim as a damsel in distress. He thinks it's his job to save her, and usually from the chaos that he's created.

In this thesis paper, I explore how the male-dominated world of the *Breaking Bad* universe is transformed into a female-led narrative through Kim Wexler in *Better Call Saul*. In reviewing the show, gender studies, and the role of women on television, I argue that the Kim character must overcome gender constraints from contemporary capitalism, big law, marriage and family, the law itself, and ultimately her own partner to become the protagonist of the show. As she challenges each of these things, Kim ultimately gains control of the show's narrative and Jimmy's fate.

As viewers speculate what the final season of *Better Call Saul* has in store for Kim, it's clear that whatever happens to Jimmy is because of Kim. She is what has motivated most of Jimmy's schemes, and her presence, or lack of presence, will decide what motivates Jimmy to fully commit to his Saul Goodman persona in *Breaking Bad*, connecting his agency to Kim's choices, not the other way around.



## **“I Save Me”: Gender, Agency, and Power in *Better Call Saul***

On September 29, 2013 the highly anticipated final episode of Vince Gilligan’s masterful *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) aired, drawing a little over 10 million viewers and ushering in a new era of elite television viewing. Television consumers began to demand more from their shows. They wanted gripping television with compelling antiheroes like Walter White. The show about a high school chemistry teacher turned meth kingpin has been re-watched, analyzed, and theorized about since it went off the air. It won numerous awards during its five-season run and has since landed in the number one spot of many “greatest TV shows of all time” lists. For all the glory and praise the show has received, there is one thing that still seems to irk some fans: Walter White’s wife, Skyler. It’s hard to pinpoint, however, what it is about the Skyler character, portrayed by actress Anna Gunn, that bothers audiences so much. Many fanboy Internet forums have concluded that she is a stereotypical nagging wife, who’s morality in the first few seasons of *Breaking Bad* was annoying, but was made even more annoying by her eventual embracing of her husband’s criminal undertakings. It seems, then, that Skyler commits the cardinal sin of being just another wife that doesn’t understand, and when she tries to understand some viewers disliked the idea of her as a criminal, on the same playing field as Walt. What does this say about the way gender is portrayed on American TV? Are women who also happen to be wives and mothers not allowed to participate in the same arenas as men?

Gilligan's second AMC vehicle stars Bob Odenkirk reprising his role as slimy lawyer Saul Goodman from *Breaking Bad*. The fan favorite's spin-off was originally supposed to be a sitcom, but Gilligan and co-creator Peter Gould changed gears last minute to tell Saul's (Jimmy as he's known in the first four seasons)<sup>1</sup> backstory as a drama. When we first meet Odenkirk's Jimmy in *Better Call Saul* (2015-present), we are also introduced to his friend and eventual romantic partner, Kim Wexler (played by Rhea Seehorn). Unlike Skylar, Kim exercises agency in relation to Jimmy. She is able to work in contrast to him, resisting the patriarchal practices he unconsciously performs and represents. In this thesis paper, I will look at Kim's character arc in *Better Call Saul* and how she shatters the gender stigma against not just Saul, but her career, the institution of law, the cartel, and expectations of family and marriage. I will explore how and why Kim gains power over all of these things to become the focal point of the show, not Jimmy. Part of this discussion will take a look at how women are portrayed on television, in contemporary capitalism, and at the intersection of personal life and workplace. I will attempt to answer how big law<sup>2</sup> holds power over Kim and how she re-aligns that power as well as how toxic masculinity in the workplace affects how Kim interacts with coworkers and solves problems. How does capitalism, specifically capitalist reproduction, link Kim's home and work lives in a career where work is always expected to be put first? And how does a lack of female counterparts change her narrative, specifically how she relates to other characters in the show and why she must act independently of her male counterparts. And, ultimately, how is *Better*

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<sup>1</sup> Author will reference character as "Jimmy" throughout this paper.

<sup>2</sup> "Big law" is used in this paper to refer to the commercial enterprise within the field of legal practice. Big law refers to law firms that are full-service and have more than 100 employees. They are usually LLCs that have a larger overarching hierarchy within their professional structures and practices.

*Call Saul*'s narrative controlled by its lone female hero? And how does that make her a foil to Saul?

In prefeminism or first-wave feminism<sup>3</sup> TV shows, audiences often see women who only operated in the wife and mother role, where the female characters stayed in the home and were foils to their husbands. Female characters were tied to the domestic realm, often providing comic relief against their partners who were usually portrayed as more realistic and grounded than the women in their lives. These female characters were also never separate from their husbands.

Andrea L. Press explores this concept in her book *Women Watching Television: Gender, Class, and Generation in the American Television Experience*. She explains:

Rarely (if ever) are early television women shown to be mature, independent individuals.

Family women in particular are shown to be women whose existence is closely bound up with, and by, others in their family group, particularly their male partners. In addition, family women on early television are consistently pictured almost exclusively in the domestic of private realm; rarely do they legitimately venture into the male, public world of work. And, unlike the male individuals peopling these shows, early television women are often depicted in inextricable solidarity with one another. (Press 29)

Here, Press shows the limited and restricted performative space granted to female characters in early American television programs. Viewers feel uncomfortable with female characters who try to cross over into their male counterpart's world. More importantly, Press points out that female characters are often in solidarity with other women, meaning they are united and agree with each

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<sup>3</sup> Feminism is divided into four different waves. First Wave Feminism began in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century and was one of the first political movements in the West. Second Wave Feminism built on the first wave during the 1960s and 1970s and challenged a woman's role in society. Third Wave Feminism happened during the 1990s and focused on individuality and rebellion. Fourth Wave Feminism is currently happening and is often thought of as an extension of the third wave. Prefeminism in this paper refers to the period of time before the second wave of the feminist movement when anticipated feminist concepts were still unknown.

other, validating whatever actions or feelings each other experiences. Although Skyler does occasionally forge a sense of solidarity with other women, this notion seems to question whether or not a woman can have solidarity with male characters. Or, to take that a step further, are they not allowed to act like men and make decisions solely for themselves, without consulting or taking others into consideration? Are female characters allowed to have agency separate from their male counterparts? Especially when those male characters are criminals? And, are female characters allowed to have their own criminal undertakings? By the fifth season of *Better Call Saul*, Kim Wexler embraces a criminal identity, accomplishing something Skylar White was never allowed to do.

Gunn said herself in an op-ed for *The New York Times* that, "I finally realized that most people's hatred of Skyler had little to do with me and a lot to do with their own perception of women and wives... Because Skyler didn't conform to a comfortable ideal of the archetypical female, she had become a kind of Rorschach test for society, a measure of our attitudes toward gender" (Gunn, "I Have a Character Issue"). Here, Gunn explains that audiences were bothered by her character because she didn't fit into a perfectly neat box of gender stereotypes. She wasn't just a wife. But she also wasn't a "bad guy." She never had control over her life with Walt. This points toward the *Breaking Bad* universe's ultimate gender problem: women are not allowed to have the power to have a narrative separate from their male partners, while participating in the same antics they do. For all the accolades and love the show has received over the years, it features poorly written female characters whose only agency is at the hands of the men around them. Unlike other shows, however, the *Breaking Bad* creators and writers were able to shift this power of gender with its prequel.

During the first season of *Better Call Saul* Kim seems to fall into familiar tropes. She's reduced to a supporting character, without any storylines that aren't linked to Jimmy. Jimmy often treats Kim as a damsel in distress. He thinks it's his job to save her, and usually from the chaos that he's created. But, as Kim tells him in the season two episode "Rebecca," "You don't save me. I save me" (00:18:00 - 00:18:04). Suddenly, Kim Wexler has arrived and her narrative shifts from one about her boyfriend, to a story about, well, her. Kim has what Skyler unfortunately lacked; her own story. But, in order to have this, her character must overcome gender constraints from capitalism, the institution of big law, the law itself, and, ultimately, her own partner.

## **Wexler v. The Institution**

*Better Call Saul* centers around the institution of law and how Jimmy may or may not belong because of his loose definition of right and wrong. For her part, Kim believes that Jimmy is a good lawyer. And believing in Jimmy means working against the system. And working against the system, in the case of big law, is working against the law itself. In her essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey explores how men assign meaning to women's bodies. Although Kim is not necessarily an overly sexual character in the series, Mulvey's argument can help explain why her association with Jimmy goes against any identity she has with big law: "Women then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (Mulvey 58). Here, I need to question whether or not Kim is the bearer or maker of meaning in her relationship with Jimmy and the institution. Does Kim

make her own meaning separate from Jimmy and her job at Jimmy's brother, Chuck's, law firm Hamlin Hamlin McGill (HHM)? Kim is certainly not a silent character. She is able to navigate her relationship with Jimmy in relation to her job by understanding the gender politics of the institution. One could argue that Jimmy sees Kim as a female damsel that needs saving because of what the institution of law has taught him about gender roles; men are in power and women do their bidding. Jimmy is constantly trying to assign Kim meaning by protecting her as his girlfriend. He sees her, of course, as his partner, but not necessarily as a lawyer, which may be why his hijinks get her in trouble. He is not considering her as an equal and as someone who can fight her own battles.

### ***Toxic Brotherly Love***

In the same way, Jimmy's older brother does not let him fight his own battles. Jimmy and Chuck often disagree about what is moral and legal. This tension between brothers drives much of the narrative of the early seasons of the show. Jimmy's childhood nickname is "Slipping Jimmy" and his past is full of scams and run-ins with the law himself. Chuck eventually takes his little brother in and moves him to Albuquerque, where he gives Jimmy a job in his law firm's mailroom to keep him out of trouble. Once there, Jimmy puts himself through law school and surprises his brother by announcing that he's passed the bar exam. Chuck refuses to give him a job at his firm, claiming that Jimmy isn't a real lawyer because he has a criminal past (Jimmy is in fact a lawyer by definition). But Jimmy's relationship with the law is significant in looking at Kim's character, because she and Jimmy met in HHM's (Chuck's firm) mailroom and both put themselves through law school with a night school program HHM offered at a local university. Like Jimmy, Kim is a pull-herself-up-by-her-bootstraps person. Her narrative is familiar—a narrative that people encounter on screen and in real life countless times—work hard and you'll

be rewarded. We learn that she has come to New Mexico from a small town in Nebraska because she wanted more for her life: "I guess one day I just looked around at my life, at who I was and realized if I kept going the way I was going – best case, probably married to the guy that ran the town gas station. Maybe cashiering down at the Hinky Dinky. It was our supermarket. I just wanted something else" (00:35:21 - 00:35:51). Kim fights the patriarchal forces around her by simply being a woman who wants something *more* than the norm. She went to classes at night to become a lawyer while working a full-time job during the day. She then earns an attorney position at HHM that she takes great pride in. She works incredibly hard at her job in hopes to one day move up the corporate ladder. However, Kim faces many challenges in trying to cement her status in big law. Like Jimmy, she is met with challenges that prevent her from achieving her professional goals. And, like Jimmy, most of these challenges are because of, well, him. Perhaps Kim's path to patriarchal professionalism as a lawyer would have been smoother had she not had such a close relationship with Jimmy. Their friendship and eventual romantic relationship is not forced upon her, of course. Kim willingly chooses to associate with Jimmy and lets others in their field observe this. Her alignment with Jimmy is defiant over what her coworkers (including Chuck) think a lawyer *should* do. If Kim is choosing to spend time with Jimmy, it's because she wants to, not because she wants to advance her career in any way. She's moving away from being a bearer of meaning for the institution and making her own meaning in her relationships.

Throughout the first season of the series, Jimmy discovers several seniors living at the Sandpiper Retirement Homes in New Mexico are being defrauded, so he brings the case up to Chuck and they begin to work on it together—something they've never done before. When it appears that they have a major class action lawsuit on their hands, Chuck suggests Jimmy give the case to HHM to handle. Jimmy agrees, in hopes that he can then work for his brother at

HHM. Chuck, and his partner Howard, however, do not allow Jimmy to handle the case. Instead, they offer him a large payout to take over the case. They then transfer the case to a different firm, Davis and Main, hurting Jimmy even more. Kim steps in and suggests that Jimmy could work on the case at Davis and Main, giving him what he wants, while keeping him out of HHM. Howard and Chuck agree to the arrangement, but Jimmy soon after makes a critical mistake—he runs an ad on television advertising Davis and Main’s services to any resident who has been affected by Sandpiper, but does not ask his new bosses for permission to run the commercial. Chuck and Howard are furious at him, as Jimmy’s actions reflect poorly on their law firm. Instead of punishing Jimmy, though, they punish Kim, because it was her idea for Chuck and Howard to bring Jimmy to Davis and Main. They sentence her to the lowest level of law: document review<sup>4</sup>. In this scenario, it seems that Chuck and Howard are assigning meaning to Kim as the person to blame in Jimmy’s mistakes with Davis and Main. However, she cannot control or predict how Jimmy will act. And, moreover, Kim is often the one who is willing to give Jimmy another chance, even though she is aware he has made plenty of mistakes in the past. She chooses to believe in him, even when history says not to. Kim is not happy about having to do document review, of course, but she takes on the challenge with pride and works hard to get back into the firm’s good graces. Kim is not ashamed of or concerned about her association with Jimmy and where it landed her. She stands by her support of him, so much so that she is willing to go against what the institution wants, making it possible for her to make meaning out of both her job and her relationship with Jimmy. She’s willing to be stalled in her career to fight for him. This allows Kim to make more meaning out of her personal relationships, rather than her relationship with work.

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<sup>4</sup> Document review is a phase of the litigation and legal process. Lawyers assigned to a case sort and analyze relevant data and documents.

Kim's punishment lasts weeks, and Jimmy feels terrible about it. Kim's reaction is to throw herself into doc review, hoping that Chuck and Howard will see her hard work and forgive her. However, Kim's usual bootstrap methods don't work in this situation. Although she is punished, it's only a means for Chuck to get to Jimmy: "And if Howard were my puppet he certainly wouldn't have recommended you to Davis and Main. Actually, I'm sure it was Kim Wexler who talked him into doing that. Hence his anger" (00:24:30 - 00:24:42). Chuck explains that Kim is really why HHM is so upset. She's being used as a pawn in their brotherly toxic masculinity game. Chuck knows that Kim is the most important thing in Jimmy's life, and he knows that using her is an easy way to punish Jimmy, instead of just having him fired. In the season two episode, "Gloves Off," Chuck and Jimmy have a long conversation about Kim's doc review situation. Jimmy tells Chuck to stop punishing Kim for something that was his fault. Chuck tells him that the situation is partly Kim's fault because she trusted Jimmy. The scene is unproductive on many levels. Chuck refuses to let up on Kim like Jimmy wants and Jimmy continues to complicate his relationship with his brother. But it's also unproductive because Kim is not there, despite being the main focus of the conversation. Here we see another scenario where men of the institution try to assign Kim meaning. Only in her relationship with Jimmy is she able to re-write this meaning, as she often serves as the rescuer to his damsel in distress.

### ***The Real Damsel in Distress***

"Gloves Off" is also where the audience first sees Jimmy really treat Kim as the damsel in distress. He believes she's his to save. But, Kim refuses to be confined by this idea. She tells Jimmy repeatedly that she makes her own choices, even when he's involved because she has her own individual agency. Even when Kim did not know that Jimmy aired the Davis and Main commercial without their permission, she resists telling Howard because she knows that

association with Jimmy by default comes with consequences. Before he goes to Chuck for help, Jimmy offers to talk to Howard for Kim to get her out of doing doc review, to which she replies: “If you go to Howard, you and I, we’re done” (00:15:00 - 00:14:04). Here, Kim makes it very clear that she doesn’t want (or need) Jimmy’s help. Talking to Howard on her behalf would probably not help matters, but having your boyfriend fight your battles is even worse. Kim knows there is no way for her to be taken seriously at HHM if Jimmy tries to protect her. The institution of big law is gendered to fit the male prerogative. The men of HHM (specifically Chuck and Howard) have the power because they also own the firm. Therefore, they control their employees' narratives, including Kim’s.

Of course, the gendered way in which Chuck and Howard operate their law firm is just a performance that their employees are willing to believe in because the institution has taught them to never question their superiors, especially if they are storied lawyers. In her essay, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” Judith Butler explains discourses of sexuality in terms of how each are essentially imitated performances. In short, there is nothing that is really male or female: “Drag is not the putting on of a gender that belongs properly to some other group, i.e. an act of expropriation or appropriation that assumes that gender is the rightful property of sex, that ‘masculine’ belongs to ‘male’ and ‘feminine’ belongs to ‘female.’ There is no ‘proper’ gender, gender proper to one sex rather than another, which is in some sense that sex’s cultural property” (Butler 956). Here, Butler points to the idea that gender is really just a performance<sup>5</sup>. Chuck and Howard, as well as big law, perform as if they can dictate the roles in which men and women play within their business. Kim proves that there is no “proper” gender because she is not

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<sup>5</sup> Gender performance here is different but related to Butler’s concept of performativity. Performativity refers to the theory that gender and gender roles are elaborate social performances that people “put on” in their day to day lives. Gender performance is the idea that gender is something engraved in daily practices, meaning they are learned practices based on cultural norms of what is feminine and what is masculine.

performing in the way Chuck, Howard, and even Jimmy are expecting her to. She does not wish to be a damsel that needs saving. Instead, she is a character who sees being an individual as more important than being a gendered cog in the big law machine.

Since Kim refuses to perform in a “female” damsel role at HHM, she is exposing how the institution of big law is obsessed with putting its employees into specific, gendered boxes. Butler explains: “Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation” (956). This shows that no character perfectly fits into one gender category, and if they did it would just be a performance to please the institution. By not conforming to the damsel trope and asking Jimmy not to talk to Howard, Kim is moving away from the mundane and asking to be looked at beyond her sex. And, by looking beyond her sex, audiences can begin to understand that she is just as cunning and in control of her career as the men she works for.

### ***Maker of Meaning***

By asking Jimmy to stay out of her situation at work, Kim is really asking him to let her be the maker of her own meaning. As Mulvey explains, men have a tendency to see women free of guilt or wrong-doing. They see women more as a “perfect product” (Mulvey 65) that should never be suspected of controlling their own narrative. Although it is made clear in “Gloves Off” that Kim did not know Jimmy hadn’t gotten permission to run his commercial, Kim has no quandaries of associating herself with Jimmy, even when she knows it could be career suicide. The institution seems to always be trying for perfect, but Kim goes against this notion through her support of Jimmy. Kim perhaps is able to admit to herself that, like Jimmy, nothing is perfect and perfection itself is next to impossible to achieve. In dismissing perfection, Kim also dismisses big law’s institutionalized obsession with it. This also calls into question whether or

not Chuck and Howard would be punishing Kim if she were a man and if her relationship with Jimmy was not romantic. Chuck explains that Kim's punishment isn't so much about her actions or what she's said to Chuck and Howard, but rather about her association with Jimmy. Chuck tells her, "My brother is not a bad person. He has a good heart. It's just, he just can't help himself. And everyone's left picking up the pieces" (00:40:32 - 00:40:53). She is being forced to do doc review because she trusts Jimmy, something Chuck can't bring himself to do. Chuck is punishing Kim for believing in something risky, something, or rather someone, who goes against what the institution of law represents. Big law seems to hold female attorneys to a higher standard than their male counterparts, and Kim's involvement with Jimmy could be seen as a weakness, not just because he is the opposite of the system, but because HHM can look down upon her for a romantic relationship with the counter to the system. But by trusting in Jimmy, Kim gives up on perfection, liberating herself from any guilt or shame from HHM.

Women are often looked down upon in the workplace if they work against the very institutions that protect their male counterparts. Kim is being punished because she has chosen to put her faith in someone who doesn't fit into the institution's typical narrative. By doing so, Kim faces backlash, but she also breaks free from the idea that the entire group-think of an institution is a one-size-fits all model. She is allowing herself to rethink and restructure an entire belief system associated with working at a law firm. She is willing to go against the institution of big law, not necessarily for love, but for the very belief that anyone can belong to a group despite its exclusivity. In Press' book, she explains how women on television are more often than not a "superior individual," who can see past institutional problems to create resolutions to inherently masculine problems:

In television, a woman might experience a problem because she is a woman, but she would solve the problem because she is a competent or even superior individual. The solution might occur to her in interaction with others, but in the end it is *private* insight and personal courage—not public or collective action—that offer her a way out. That television would come to this solution in the representation of women’s issues, given the deep cultural legacy of utilitarian individualism, is not at all surprising. Fiction and nonfiction television alike are clearly more able to represent politics as a function of personality than as a product of social structure or collective action. It is perhaps ironic that such ‘collective’ productions as are television products take such an individualist bent. (39)

Thinking of Kim as working as an individual separates her from big law and its institutional practices and values, she then becomes a character focused on what the institution can do for her, not the other way around. There is a power in Kim’s belief in Jimmy because he is a problem. But he’s a problem that she almost sees as more of a solution to big law. She knows the work Jimmy put into being a lawyer and how hard he works at trying to figure out the type of lawyer he wants to be. She values how he subscribes to the bootstraps narrative, because it’s her narrative, too. Institutions teach us that hard work pays off, so Kim is challenging the fact that big law operates more on politics than on the hard work narrative it heavily pushes. She knows that it’s politics keeping Jimmy out of HHM and she knows that it’s politics keeping her in doc review.

### ***The Political and The Other***

When Kim sees that Chuck and Howard are not forgiving her based on her work in doc review, she decides to get political. In the season 2 episode “Rebecca,” she begins calling every

contact in law that she knows, looking for a big case she can bring to HHM. She eventually talks to her friend, Paige, who works for Mesa Verde—a bank in New Mexico that’s looking to expand to other states in the West. When Kim brings Mesa Verde’s case to Howard he is grateful. He and Kim meet with Paige and her boss, Kevin, and it looks promising that Kim has just brought HHM a big moneymaker. When Kim asks Howard what the next steps are he tells her, “You’ve got enough on your plate in Doc Review” (00:32:40 - 00:32:43). Suddenly, the institution has failed Kim. She was not rewarded for her hard work, or her willingness to bring new clients with a lot of money to the firm. Instead of going back to doc review or even arguing with Howard, Kim decides to leave HHM and take Mesa Verde with her.

In episode 7 of season 2 (“Inflatable”), Kim agrees to share an office space with Jimmy, where she’ll focus on banking law with Mesa Verde, and he’ll start his own elder law business – separate firms under one roof. Before that can happen, however, Kim needs to find a way to get Mesa Verde on board with leaving HHM and coming to her solo practice. She gives them an impassioned plea at a lunch (“I am not the safe choice. The safe choice for you would be HHM. I believe, however, that I am the right choice” (00:13:28 - 00:13:40) that impresses both Paige and Kevin, but they ultimately decide to stay with HHM because of the institution – it’s a safer bet to be represented by a large firm with a long history of success, rather than a newly practicing solo lawyer who has zero clients of her own. Enacting the damsel narrative again, Jimmy feels sorry for his new officemate, and devises a plan in episode 8 (“Fifi”) in which he switches Mesa Verde’s address around on paperwork he finds at Chuck’s house, causing confusion in court proceedings. Mesa Verde then decides to leave HHM and go with Kim. They claim that the mistake actually proves that HHM is too big, and they need more individual attention from a lawyer like Kim. Kim does not know that Jimmy switched the addresses for her benefit until it

becomes a major plot point of the third season of the show. However, she gets a major win here because Paige and Kevin come to the conclusion that big law doesn't always function like it should. They feel the individual is a more valuable type of lawyer. By staying with Kim, she serves as a symbol against the functions of big law, going back to Butler's point that the gendered institutional politics of big law is just a performance: "In Freud's view, which I continue to find useful, incorporation – a kind of psychic miming – is a response to, and refusal of, *loss*. Gender as the site of such psychic mimes is thus constituted by the variously gendered Others who have been loved and lost, where the loss is suspended through a melancholic and imaginary incorporation (and preservation) of those Others into the psyche" (959). Here, Butler talks about the idea of "The Other," a persona that represents a gendered other. In Kim leaving HHM and taking Mesa Verde with her, she is experiencing a type of loss. She is losing her gendered "female" self in the eyes of big law. By leaving HHM, Kim is able to shed her female lawyer performance the institution has assigned to her, and practice law beyond her sex. The institution of big law preserves gendered "male" and "female" stereotypes, and Kim's liberation from HHM means she is leaving The Other behind and focusing on Mesa Verde without gender performance.

Even after the drama of the address switching with Mesa Verde, Kim's interests slowly begin to drift away from banking law. As she puts it, she suddenly finds herself searching for "more," which means she has found that even running your own solo practice is institutionalized. If the law's main purpose is to help others, how does banking law help anyone but the banks? In the season four episode "Talk," Kim goes to the courthouse to observe Judge Munsinger's hearings. It's unclear what she's looking for at first. Munsinger asks her if she has a case at the courthouse and she tells him no, that she's simply observing for the day, something busy lawyers

don't really do. The bailiff then tells Kim that Judge Munsinger wants to see her in his chambers during lunch. When she goes to see him, he explains to her that his courtroom is not a place to find a "save-the-broken-lawyer" (00:12:32 - 00:12:34) case of a lifetime. He tells her, "movies are the only place where those once-in-a-lifetime cases exist." If Kim is looking for some excitement then she may be asking for too much in an Albuquerque courthouse. This scene shows that Kim is searching for something. Judge Munsinger suggests that if she really is looking for something new, that the public defender's office has an overload of cases she could help with. Public defense<sup>6</sup> is certainly a different beast than banking law. It's also everything the institution is not. Public defending is often for little money, with very little guarantee of a win. And Kim knows this. She has already shown she has a soft spot for Jimmy and his slipping ways. Public defense doesn't seem too far away from Kim's trust in Jimmy, which, as I've discussed, challenges the very nature of what the institution stands for. She believes in the individual, even if the individual has committed a crime. In aligning herself with the ideals of a public defender, Kim is looking the institution of HHM and banking in the face and saying she does not believe that the law should be about making money.

As Kim begins to take on pro-bono work at the public defender's office, she is completely severing any ties she had to big law, and dismissing the institution altogether. This could go back to Butler's point about The Other. Humans are always trying to find identity, many without the luxury of self-identifying themselves: "That 'Other' installed in the self thus establishes the permanent incapacity of that itself to achieve self-identity; it is as it were always already disrupted by that Other; the disruption of the Other at the heart of the self is the very condition of that self's possibility" (960). Here, Butler describes identity as something that's near

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<sup>6</sup> A lawyer appointed by the state to represent someone who cannot afford their own representation in a criminal case.

impossible to individualize because it's disrupted by the gendered Other. For Kim, this means the gender of the institution and its attempts to identify her. By leaving behind the institution altogether, Kim is proving that she can in fact self-identify. The system makes it seem as if you cannot leave, and a woman certainly can't leave because her only agency is the definition big law has given her. In Kim, the audience sees a woman who is able to leave big law because she does not allow herself to be identified by its gender perfection. Kim is able to deny the damsel in distress trope by leaving the institution behind.

## **Wexler v. Capitalism**

When looking at a female narrative through a capitalist lens, I have to consider that capitalism genders women in a domestic role, rather than one in the workforce. Therefore I must look at the agency of women in the context of capitalist labor. First, I need to look at the image capitalism imposes on women to understand how Kim re-genders them. In Chandra Talpade Mohanty's article "Women Workers and Capitalist Scripts," she explores the idea of "agency as workers" and the historical significance of "women's work," specifically how it naturalizes gender and race hierarchies (Mohanty 977). Working women are engaged with capitalist scripts that keep their agencies in the household, while men sell women's products and live on profits from women's labor (983). Women, of course, are closely associated with home and family, so women have been identified as "nonworkers" even when they have in fact been working. Society believes they belong in the home even if they do have a job outside of it. Work should never come first – it should always be a women's role in the family. Kim never mentions wanting a family. Her career has always come first. And the show does not treat this notion negatively.

Instead, Kim's ambition is equal to Jimmy's in terms of wanting respect from peers and the law community.

This is unique for a female narrative as a capitalist view sees women as a means of exploitation: "Capitalist patriarchies and racialized, class/caste-specific hierarchies are a key part of the long history of domination and exploitation of women, but struggles against these practices and vibrant, creative, collective forms of mobilization and organizing have also always been a part of our histories" (982). Mohanty feels that despite the exploitation of women in the workforce and at home, women have been able to counter these capitalist scripts in order to reform society's understanding of the type of work women can do. And no one does this better than Kim Wexler.

### ***What Kim Lacks***

Of course, we can't talk about Mohanty or the feminist narrative that *Better Call Saul* weaves without addressing what it lacks, even in Kim's gendered experiences with capitalism. Kim's resistance to capitalism is a resistance in part to the men around her, all of whom are of the white working class. However, Kim exists within this white privilege as well. She works in a profession that automatically gives her more agency than a woman of color. And, because Kim is not a woman of color, her narrative in *Better Call Saul* cannot fully reflect every woman's struggle against patriarchal capitalism. Nor can the show as a whole, since there are no other main female characters, let alone women of color.

Mohanty explains in her essay, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse" that Western feminist scholars look at women in third-world countries as a single group; an other. She argues that feminist scholars need to expand their definition of feminism, otherwise we are at risk of grouping all female experiences together:

The assumption of women as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location or contradictions, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy (as male dominance – men as a correspondingly coherent group) which can be applied universally and cross-culturally. The context of analysis can be anything from kinship structures and the organization of labor to media representations. (Mohanty 337)

Looking at Mohanty's definition here, the idea that women are represented in feminism as one group with the same class, race, desires, and goals means disregarding a viewpoint of anyone who is not a white woman in some sort of position of power. In order to talk about capitalism in this paper, I have to consider that Kim and *Better Call Saul* do not represent a full range of women and their experiences. Although the show is set in a traditionally diverse location, there are no female characters of color, let alone any female characters that interact with Kim for more than a few scenes in any episode. Kim then experiences a type of white privilege similar to that of her male counterparts because she cannot fully represent what it means for all women to face all capitalist narratives.

Ultimately, Mohanty argues that this sort of simplification of gender does not help any individual or group of women fight an institution like capitalism. Part of this is due to simplifying *who* has power. In disregarding all female viewpoints, it appears that power dynamics are always men versus women:

What characterizes women as a group is their gender (sociologically not necessarily biologically defined) over and above everything else, indicating a monolithic notion of sexual difference. Because women are thus constituted as a coherent group, sexual differences becomes coterminous with female subordination, and power is automatically

defined in binary terms: people who have it (read:men), and people who do not (read: women). Men exploit, women are exploited... such simplistic formulations are both reductive and ineffectual in designing strategies to combat oppression. All they do is reinforce binary divisions between men and women. (344)

In short, if Kim represents all women, she cannot fully combat capitalism. She challenges capitalism, but she still enjoys white privilege. She still exploits the idea of men versus women, and does not help define different female narratives, only her own privileged one. That privilege is part of the reason that Kim is able to hold power over a patriarchal capitalism. If Kim conquers capitalism, then viewers must acknowledge that Kim does not have the ability to do this for *all* women. Because of her white privilege, Kim still represents a sort of capitalism: “If the struggle for a just society is seen in terms of the move from powerless to powerful for women as a *group*, and this is the implication in feminist discourse which structures sexual difference in terms of the division between the sexes, then the new society would be structurally identical to the existing organization of power relations, constituting itself as a simple *inversion* of what exists” (351). Here, Mohanty explains that we can’t group all women into one category, especially one that has power because that power will still be patriarchal in nature. Only when we allow diverse characters to represent their struggle will a narrative truly achieve a re-gendering of an institution like capitalism. Therefore, Kim can only represent her own narrative against capitalism, not the narrative of women as a whole.

### ***Within a Patriarchal Capitalism***

Building off of Mohanty, Douglas Kellner explains in his essay “The Media and Social Problems,” that popular media can have both positive and negative effects when it comes to the stories they tell. He explains, “in general media have contradictory effects and that in many cases

it is impossible to accurately discern or distinguish positive or negative features that are often interconnected” (Kellner 8). This is to say that although Kim cannot represent all female perspectives, she can still tell a compelling narrative within a certain realm of understanding. Perhaps then, audiences need to look at Kim’s story as one that operates within a specific industry or narrative jurisdiction. Her character does a good job of representing a female narrative within the stereotypical world of patriarchal capitalism, which is still an important story to tell. One of the more shocking scenes of *Better Call Saul* begins with Kim driving in her car, going over case facts for Mesa Verde out loud, even practicing her arguments out loud at times. She sounds capable, confident, and fair as she practices. She’s even practicing her dialect and tone. The scene is almost peaceful. Then, without warning, it does a quick jump cut that forces the viewer to jolt. The next split second the viewer sees Kim squished by an airbag as she struggles to push the driver’s side door open as various Mesa Verde papers fly about in the middle of the desert. Kim has crashed her car on the way to a meeting and broken her arm in the process. Viewers see her get out of her car, clutching her arm and making light crying noises. It’s hard to tell if she’s emotional because of the pain, or the fact that she’s been derailed from work. This season three episode (“Fall”) is meant to show us that Kim has been overworking herself and her fatigue has finally caught up with her. She needs to slow down. Capitalism often plays a role in how women function in the workplace. If this was a male focused narrative, the fatigue Kim is feeling from her work with Mesa Verde would be a sign to take a break. Kim brings about reform in these patriarchal capitalist scripts when the audience compares her to Jimmy. Although it might seem like an unfair comparison at times, the staggering differences between the two helps build an argument for Kim’s fight against capitalism.

First, after Jimmy loses his law license for a year (in season 3, episode 6 “Off Brand”) because of the Mesa Verde address switching incident, Kim is the one who pays the various bills for their shared office space while continuing to work on her Mesa Verde obligations. She pays for their administrative assistant, utilities, and rent as Jimmy tries to make it by with little ventures here and there. Kim also assures Jimmy that she doesn’t mind continuing to pay for their office, and even shows concern when she feels like Jimmy is draining his bank account to try and pay his half of things. The script is flipped here, as Kim is the one protecting and providing for Jimmy, whereas usually in a capitalist narrative it’s the man’s job to take care of his partner. Jimmy seems to accept their role reversal as well, understanding that Kim is balanced and able to provide, while he is dealing with an unstable situation that is a direct consequence of his bad behavior.

This dynamic between Kim and Jimmy also provides an argument for Kim as the breadwinner of her and Jimmy’s family unit. Although not family in the traditional sense, Kim and Jimmy do seem to operate as a unit. Mohanty’s explains that within a family unit, there is a difference in what’s considered men’s work and women’s work:

The polarization between men and women’s work, where men actually defined themselves as exporters and businessmen who invested in women’s labor, bolstered the social and ideological definition of women as housewives and their work as ‘leisure time activity.’ In other words, work, in this context, was grounded in sexual identity, in concrete definitions of femininity, masculinity, and heterosexuality. (983)

Here, men historically were the exporters of labor who then sponsored women’s work. This reinforced the idea that women were meant to work in the home and that anything else in their lives was simply extra. More importantly, any work was defined by gender, meaning women

were supposed to work in the home and let men be the workers who earned money because work for women should be female. If Kim is the breadwinner for her family unit, then she is doing male work, while Jimmy is doing the “leisure time activity.” Kim provides a roof over her and Jimmy’s head, as Jimmy seems to move into Kim’s apartment sometime during the third season of the series. This is a much better situation for Jimmy, as he was living on a small pull-out couch in his former office within a nail salon before he began dating Kim. There’s never any discussion between the two characters about money or how the apartment is being paid for, but it doesn’t seem too far-fetched to assume that Kim is taking care of that bill as well. Therefore, Kim is the exporter of labor and the businessman who invests in Jimmy’s labor.

Mohanty explains that within capitalism women’s work is viewed as a leisure time activity. This idea is re-gendered in *Better Call Saul* because Jimmy is always in a state of changing, whether it’s his job, his goals, or his financial situation. He has difficulty staying at one job and keeping a steady flow of income. He even goes so far as to lose his law license over a silly mistake. After his license has been suspended for a year, he tries his hand at various odd jobs from working in a cell phone store, to trying to sell TV ads to small businesses. He can’t, then, be the head of his household if he cannot remain reliable. Kim, on the other hand, is always stable with a steady flow of income. Even when she leaves HHM to be a solo attorney for Mesa Verde, she makes the transition seamlessly.

Kellner explains in his essay that media only sees women as victims, rarely portraying them as forces that can positively overcome their struggles:

Media representations thus often construct women and their social problems as victims and objects, and mainstream media rarely present positive representations of women’s movements or collective forms of struggle, rather focusing on women as individual

examples of specific social problems like rape or domestic violence. In arguing for historically and culturally grounded understandings of women's multiple experiences and resistances, Mohanty presents important theoretical and methodological issues that challenge hegemonies and asymmetries of power in critical cultural studies. (Kellner 7)

In thinking of Kim as the head of her household, she is also a woman that can overcome her social problems, like leaving HHM and working as a sole practitioner. Kim can handle change and uncertainty, while Jimmy can't. One of Kim's most important character traits is her conciseness. She is not easily rattled and is able to make pointed decisions under extreme pressure. We see this when she's in court or when she's working with Mesa Verde. Even when she was sentenced to doc review at HHM by Chuck and Howard, she was able to calmly brainstorm solutions to her problem. Kim thinks all of her actions through thoroughly before she does them, while Jimmy leaps into situations without thinking. Thus, Kim becomes more than just her social problems. She is allowed to be separate from and overcome her past and struggles, while Jimmy is constantly haunted by his. This difference between the two characters allows Kim to be in charge of her household as it's her money and stability that Jimmy is protected and cared for by.

An important thing to remember about Jimmy through this lens is the female roles he then takes on in Kim's life. As Mohanty explains, "Women's work in family business is unpaid and produces dependencies that are similar to those of homeworkers whose labor, although paid, is invisible" (989). If Jimmy is dependent on Kim for money, then she is dependent on him for homemaker products. We often see little moments in episodes where Jimmy makes a plan for dinner that night or encourages Kim to take a break from work to relax with him and watch a movie or go out for a drink. In these instances, Jimmy is providing an unpaid service for Kim,

while he's still working his odd jobs, trying to regain his status as a lawyer. In return, there is an unbalance in their relationship that ultimately makes them unequal, with Kim holding the power in the relationship. Because she holds the traditional job and the money, Kim will always have power over Jimmy in their family unit.

And although Kim has money, she doesn't seem to care about it. As Kim begins to become weary of banking law and visits Judge Munsinger's court, she begins to take on pro-bono cases for the public defender's office. As a result, Kim starts to put less of an emphasis on her work with Mesa Verde, and seems to find more passion in helping people as a public defender. Those that choose to be public defenders usually feel called to a cause, rather than called by money. In Kim's growing interest in public defense cases, one could argue that she wants to fight for those who, like women, are not usually seen in positions of power. In a way, Kim is also wanting to fight for someone like Jimmy, who lacks power. Mohanty points out that, "while women are conscious of the contradictions of their daily lives as women and as workers, and enact their resistance, they have not organized actively to identify their collective needs and to transform the conditions of their daily lives" (993). Here, Kim could see herself as filling a role in which she is helping enact a resistance against the law's tie to capitalism and its tendency to only want to produce money.

Kim's interest in the robbing-the-rich-and-serving-the-poor idea begins even earlier in the series, before she ever visits Judge Munsinger. During season two's opener "Switch," Kim goes with Jimmy to a bar to try and convince him to take the Davis and Main job. While there, the duo spot a loud stock broker who brags about his success. The two have a drink with him and tell him that they're siblings who have just inherited a large sum of money. Jimmy and Kim order a round of Zafiro Anejo, an expensive tequila in the *Breaking Bad* universe. They order several

rounds of the tequila and con the investor to pay for the entire tab at the end of the night, costing him hundreds of dollars. This is the first time the audience sees Kim behave immorally.

Although she admits what they did was wrong, she also enjoys the thrill of conning someone who has likely taken money from other people. This side of Kim is entirely different from the persona that she usually puts on in the show. In taking part in one of Jimmy's schemes, she is denouncing her ties to a capitalist agenda. She is also proving that a woman can take part in and be the instigator of discussions about money. And not just that, but can be a shrewd businesswoman.

Lastly, Kim rewrites or, rather, re-genders capitalism by neglecting her duties as a homemaker. Mohanty reminds us that women's work is repressive: "The definition of the social identity of women as workers is not only class-based, but, in fact, in this case, must be grounded in understandings of race, gender, and caste histories and experiences of work. In effect, I suggest that homework is one of the most significant, and repressive forms of 'women's work' in contemporary global capitalism" (995). Here, she explains that work within the home is the worst effect on women in capitalism. Kim could fall prey to stress at home, but it's really the stress of work that causes her to crash her car. In fact, although Kim is often stressed by what is going on with Jimmy, it's her work as a lawyer that always comes first. As a result, she is able to neglect her home life and the repressiveness of it. Kim's accident is caused by her ambition and need to work for Mesa Verde. In a way, she is free from the guilt of home life and family because she completely dismisses the notion. And when she does break her arm in a car accident, she doesn't stop working from home as she recovers. Her focus is still the same, even after a life-threatening incident. She sees work as her ultimate product, not home. And once again, Jimmy is the one who takes care of her and makes sure she is comfortable as she works from home with a

broken arm. He takes her to doctor's appointments, helps her eat, bathe, and sleep. He is her caretaker and caretaker of their home, even after Kim is forced to physically be at home. This re-gendering of the capitalist role given to women and their work puts Kim at the head of her household and gives her power in decision making, especially when it comes to finances. And this ultimately gives her power over her narrative and Jimmy, making their marriage second to her identity as a character. Kim also transcends the classic capitalist ideology that surrounds women in the home because her marriage is decidedly unconventional.

## **Wexler v. Marriage and Family**

Kim and Jimmy do not seem focused on starting a family together, but serve as their own nontraditional family unit. The couple live together for much of the series, and although they never explicitly utter the word "love" or anything close to it, they obviously have a great affection for one another. Their lack of definition actually makes for a compelling feminist narrative—one in which Kim is able to be free from the expectations of wifely and motherly duties, while still having a support system in Jimmy. I've already established that Kim and Jimmy's roles are reversed in their relationship, with Kim being the stable breadwinner and Jimmy being the homemaker of sorts, but I also need to consider their family structure to argue for a re-gendered dynamics of power, which ultimately give Kim the upper hand in the relationship.

The duo's family breaks expectations simply by being nontraditional. In the same way, their legal marriage in season five gives them spousal privilege<sup>7</sup> in the eyes of a court of law,

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<sup>7</sup> Spousal privilege refers to communication privileges between spouses, which protects someone in a valid marriage from testifying in court about something their spouse told them in confidence.

allowing Kim to add another layer of power to their dynamic. She can suddenly know about Jimmy's illegal activity without ever having to testify against him. She can fully understand him now, giving her the ultimate upper hand. He can't hide anything from her anymore. But more on this spousal privilege later. For now, it's important to focus on how their marriage affects the family. In Press' "Women Watching Television," she discusses prefeminism and how it attempted to define women in the family:

Prefeminist fiction television had no shortage of women who were active, insightful, and personally courageous. And indeed there was frequently the suggestion in early programming that women's lives were colored by an injustice that came to their sex. But here, different from later television narratives, there is a sharp dichotomy between women's social roles *as women* and the divergent path they would have to traverse were they to escape their destiny as women and become fully articulated human beings. (Press 29)

Here, being a woman in a television narrative and being human can be two different things. Traditionally, female TV characters were wives and mothers who functioned within the home and their stories depended on their husbands' stories. One could argue that Kim is not separate from Jimmy, as much of her story is brought about by Jimmy's antics. What makes Kim different from this prefeminist idea is the fact that she is a fully articulated human with or without Jimmy.

### ***The Future***

In fact, Jimmy's story is more often than not connected to Kim, as she serves as his moral compass for much of the show. In Brunella Tedesco-Barlocco's article "It's (Not) All Good, Man: *Better Call Saul* and the Nostalgic Reconstruction of an Ever-Longing Character," she

explains how Kim is able to keep Jimmy out of trouble: “In his case, family—his brother Chuck McGill, and Kim, both talented lawyers—is the force that drives him away from crime: as he confesses in ‘Switch’ and ‘Inflatable,’ pleasing both Chuck and Kim is what keeps Jimmy from his ‘morally flexible’ ways” (Tedesco-Barlocco 20). In wanting to keep Jimmy on the right side of the law, Kim has power over him because he wants to please her and make her happy. Jimmy is the one who is seeking Kim’s approval. Kim then gives Jimmy meaning, not the other way around. Jimmy gains a certain kind of status from being married to Kim. Jimmy is still searching and is insecure in many ways. Kim, on the other hand, is confident in who she is and what she stands for. This makes it much easier for Jimmy to follow her lead.

In the same way, Kim is a fully conceived human character by her focus on the future. Tedesco-Barlocco’s article presents the idea that Jimmy will always be stuck in the past:

Kim and Chuck’s influence, values, and work ethic often awake a sense of guilt or duty in Jimmy that steer him temporarily into the ‘correct’ path, but do not placate his supposed instincts. The scant rewards gained from following Kim and Chuck’s values finally fail to outweigh the pleasures and the comfort of the past, where Jimmy’s alleged authenticity resides; when Jimmy uses the death of his brother to regain his suspended law license, seemingly purging himself of Chuck’s moral requirements, he announces a future that is substantially fused with his past, a perceived ‘truer self’ that replaces his identity as Jimmy. (22)

If viewers think of Jimmy as the past and Kim as the future, it’s obvious that Kim is the one who brings Jimmy along with her. Although this doesn’t always align with what Jimmy wants or feels comfortable with, his connection to his wife makes him stay. As Tedesco-Barlocco rightfully points out, however, Jimmy ultimately feels more comfortable in the past, which may lead to

problems for his marriage. If trouble does occur, it's hard to argue that Jimmy would be fine without Kim. But because Kim moves toward the future and not back to the past, she seems to be better fit for standing on her own if she needs to. Like a traditional television family, Kim takes on the role of the man, who would fare better in a break-up because he keeps the power. In the same way, Kim would keep the power because she is the breadwinner and because she is unable to move backward with Jimmy.

### ***Marriage But Not Romance***

Kim and Jimmy's marriage is also nontraditional because it is not necessarily one built around romance. Yes, the couple share a romantic relationship. But, their decision to get married is strictly based on spousal privilege—the idea that they can tell each other anything about their legal dealings and cases without getting the other into a legal situation with the knowledge they may have shared privately in their home. In short, they get married not because they *want* to but because they *need* to. Marriage in Western culture is viewed as something based around love, not legality, although marriage is a legal proceeding. Kim and Jimmy's nontraditional view of marriage makes a case for their use of one another. They both need something from each other to survive. However, Jimmy seems to need Kim more than she needs him. Television marriages often benefit the man more than the woman: “Family women in particular are shown to be women whose existence is closely bound up with, and by, others in their family group, particularly their male partners” (Press 29). But what if a marriage for spousal privilege serves Kim more than it does Jimmy? After all, Jimmy is often getting into illegal situations and dragging Kim in with him. Thinking about this as a marriage of convenience for Kim, it's apparent that she is able to protect herself from getting blindsided by Jimmy's actions. Because she will be able to know things before they happen, she is given the ability to save herself,

without Jimmy's help. And this ultimately goes against his goal of confining her to the damsel narrative, making the marriage of no use to him, other than companionship.

In Press' book she spends quite a bit of time discussing the classic sitcom *I Love Lucy* and Lucy's departure from gender norms. In the same way that Kim re-genders the dynamics of power in being a wife, Lucy re-genders the idea that women can be sneaky and cunning:

Many plots revolve around Lucy's struggle to escape her circumscribed housewife role and enter the glamorous world of show business in which her husband works. In a typical plot of the show, Lucy (Lucille Ball) manipulates and schemes (her 'scheming' character is often referred to in the course of the series) to get a part in some production in which her husband Ricky (Desi Arnaz) is involved. Through trickery and deceit, Lucy again and again *almost* achieves her aim—show-biz fame and glory are almost hers. (29)

Kim shares many characteristics with Lucy in this sense, as she also goes after things she wants and manipulates certain aspects in her marriage to protect Jimmy from himself. The difference between these two female protagonists, however, is that Kim is free in her marriage to have choice and a career, while Lucy's attempts to escape being a housewife always fail miserably, for comic effect. However, in the same way that Lucy drives the narrative of every episode of *I Love Lucy*, so does Kim drive the narrative of *Better Call Saul*. Her control of the narrative continues to redefine the traditional role of a wife:

While the men try to protect their private lives by confining their wives, Lucy and Ethel resist. Together they live, create, and recreate a subculture of resistance against the dominant patriarchy as they attempt, usually in vain, to subvert the norms characterizing the dominant culture, which their husbands' desires and beliefs represent. They confide in each other and generally help each other to subvert the desires of the men in their lives,

whose interests are so different from, and so often in conflict with, their own. Lucy and Ethel as a duo engage in a very active sort of resistance against men, a resistance that ironically, in its continued failure, reproduces both their femininity and domesticity. (30)

Like Lucy and Ethel, Kim goes against the desires and beliefs of a male-focused marriage to be able to protect her family and move them forward. Although Kim generally lacks a female counterpart in the show, Jimmy serves as her Ethel in the sense that he roots for Kim unconditionally, without ever feeling hurt or jealous of her success. This again is a re-gendering of the dynamics of power in their marriage as Jimmy allows Kim to subvert the typical desires of a male-led household. By not confining his wife as Press says, Jimmy is allowing Kim to create her own subculture of resistance, making their marriage one that is focused on how the wife moves its narrative forward, not the husband. This idea becomes important, especially when Jimmy makes a shift to his Saul Goodman persona, becoming a foil to Kim, rather than a partner. And in thinking of Kim as the character that's truly moving the narrative forward, then audiences can understand why she chooses to become involved in Jimmy's Saul undertakings, especially when he crosses paths with the cartel in season five of the show.

## **Wexler v. The Cartel**

Since I've established that Kim holds power over the institution, I can argue that she is also able to hold power over a different sort of organization: the cartel. The cartel plays an important role in the later seasons of *Better Call Saul*. Although it's a dangerous association for Kim to have, she navigates the relationship by using one of her best strengths: her use of words. Kim uses very little language when she can help it (another thing that is the complete opposite of Jimmy, who often finds himself talking too much), something actress Rhea Sheehorn has said is

very purposeful in the writing and acting of the character. Kim does not give others a chance to see her flustered because she is so selective with the words she chooses to say out loud. Part of this strategy goes back to her job. Lawyers are expected to make their arguments decisively, with no doubt or cracks in their case. More importantly, even when they aren't sure of themselves they have to pretend to be. This skill serves Kim well as Jimmy's actions entangle their marriage into business with the cartel. By being able to hold her own when communicating with cartel members, even when she's unsure of what she's doing, Kim not only shows how good of a lawyer she is, she also proves she's able to stand as an equal with an organization usually associated with men. And a step further, Kim breaks typical gender norms by communicating with the cartel, while also defending her husband against them.

### ***In Crisis***

By the time *Better Call Saul* reached its fourth season, audiences saw two very important developments occur. First, Jimmy declares in the season finale, "Winner," that he will officially be going by "Saul Goodman" in all of his legal (and illegal) dealings moving forward. We also meet a new character—Lalo Salamanca—who has traveled to Albuquerque from Mexico to take over cartel business for his uncle, Hector Salamanca, after he suffers a stroke. Lalo fits right in with his family's drug business, and begins to take a greater interest in the small details of the operation. Viewers eventually see Saul and Lalo's paths become intertwined when Lalo is arrested for murder and seeks Saul's help. He instructs Jimmy to pick up his bail money in Mexico, offering to pay him \$100,000 to move the cash. Jimmy agrees, but Kim is upset, reminding him that he is a lawyer, not a bagman for the cartel. Jimmy picks up two bags of cash

in the desert, but is quickly stopped by gunmen who are after the money. Mike Ehrmantraut<sup>8</sup> shows up just in time to save Jimmy by firing back at the gunmen. Jimmy and Mike then head back to Albuquerque without exactly knowing where to go. They drive in Jimmy's car for a while until it breaks down, forcing the men to push it over the edge of the road to hide it from the men who are after them. They then continue on foot. While this hitch in the original plan occurs, Kim becomes increasingly worried because Jimmy does not arrive back home like he should have. In a desperate move, Kim goes to visit Lalo in jail to get answers and uses her perceptive communication skills to interrogate Lalo in hopes to save her husband. Kim's confidence in her skills helps her gain and keep Lalo's attention as they discuss Jimmy's whereabouts.

Some Internet forums will claim that for all of Kim's calculated actions throughout the series, going to see Lalo in jail is the dumbest thing she's ever done. She's been caught in a moment of weakness as she lets her emotions get the best of her. However, her willingness to face, not just a dangerous man, but an entire dangerous organization shows just how in control Kim is. Upon arriving at the jail, Kim lies and says she is a member of Lalo's legal team. Lalo is brought out to meet with Kim in a small room. Kim does not show any emotion when she is left alone with Lalo. Instead, she remains calm and talks to Lalo as if she really is his lawyer. She is quick and to the point, using as little words as possible – a signature of the character's dialogue. She tells Lalo she knows who he is – who he really is – and tells him she wants to know where Saul is. Lalo is understandably confused. Instead of explaining herself, Kim simply replies, “he didn't betray your confidence” (00:36:17 - 00:36:19). This shows Kim is aware of how the cartel operates. She knows trust is more important than lawyers and money to Lalo. Kim is also smart. And as a lawyer, she knows what clients are going to ask before they ask it. When she does

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<sup>8</sup> Mike Ehrmantraut is a character in both *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*. He often serves as a private investigator, “cleaner,” and “fixer” for Saul.

finally reveal that she is Saul's wife, Lalo is surprised, i.e. surprised Saul's wife is a pretty blonde lawyer. Lalo also deduces that Kim is afraid that her husband didn't return home and that's why she's come to see him. Lalo finds this amusing. Without saying it, he's already thinking of how he can use Kim against Saul if he has to.

It's easy to see how this scene appears to give Lalo the upper hand. One could even argue that he's outsmarted Kim in a way. He's made her feel like a fool. But, there might not be any other character in the show powerful enough to stand up to Lalo. Perhaps Kim can do what Jimmy can't: stand up to the cartel. In Jessie Hewitt's article "The 'Mad' Woman in a Man's World," she explores gender, madness, family, and psychiatric power in Nineteenth-Century France. She makes an argument for gender as unstable, meaning that both men and women's power can shift depending on the situation:

As Judith Surkis points out, gender instability—in and of itself—is not necessarily subversive (especially because gender is *always* unstable). In her analysis of sex and citizenship in late nineteenth-century France, she argues that indications of masculinity in 'crisis' actually provided powerful impetus for the policing of gender boundaries, in that 'instability fueled the regulatory logic by which an idealized masculinity and a specific configuration of social and political power were articulated and maintained. (Hewitt 167)

Here, I can take the idea of a man in "crisis" and apply it to both Jimmy and Lalo in comparison to Kim. The men are in a sort of crisis—Lalo is desperate to get out of jail and back to his cartel duties, while Jimmy is fighting to establish his own agency and power as Saul Goodman. Kim, on the other hand, is not necessarily in crisis. She is worried about Jimmy, yes, but she is not in crisis about who she is. She plays her conversation with Lalo like a lawyer. She's confident in her ability to do her job and her ability to persuade people. She's also confident in her knowledge

of how the cartel operates and how Lalo will see their situation. She's not necessarily successful in getting the information she wants from Lalo, but she has power over him because she is not afraid of him. After all, Lalo is used to everyone bending to his will, and Jimmy is no exception here. Kim does not care who he is, she cares about herself.

Kim also shows power in this scene with Lalo in her marriage. There is certainly a point to be made about Kim's level of attractiveness versus Jimmy's, which prompts Lalo to snicker. However, Kim is not a sexualized being in this scene. Instead, she ignores Lalo's comments about her appearance. One of Kim's defining features is her ability to hide what she's thinking. Her facial expression never signifies any disgust or annoyance. She's stone cold. She doesn't allow Lalo to sexualize her. In fact, as the only female character in the main cast, Kim rarely lets any of her male counterparts sexualize her. She doesn't give them any time to, because she is usually all about the business at hand. Kim uses very little language so other characters are forced to pay attention to her. Like this scene with Lalo, she doesn't necessarily know if contacting him is the right thing to do to find Jimmy, but she keeps her cool because she's determined to help her husband.

Lalo accuses Kim of being "scared enough" to come down to the jail to try and find Jimmy in this scene. She does not appear scared, although she is. Instead she almost seems brave. She's brave for coming to the jail to face a member of the cartel. She could be considered braver than Jimmy, as she's able to be vulnerable in front of Lalo. Jimmy is scared to appear vulnerable to anyone, while Kim seeks power in her vulnerability. She knows that by being honest she can get what she wants. And, as mentioned earlier, trust is important to someone like Lalo. She's establishing a relationship where he can trust her. Jimmy is ultimately not trustworthy, because he is rarely truthful. In the same way that Jimmy *wants* power over his own

narrative, Kim is able to create her agency because she is able to interact with the cartel without fear. Hewitt explains that “‘Mad’ women were doubly marginalized and thus had few weapons with which to combat the psychiatric system” (171). If Kim is “mad” for power, it’s only to protect her family. There is also a danger in Kim that, like Jimmy, sometimes longs for dangerous experiences. The audience sees this when she helps swindle the stock broker in season two and again when she tries to trick Mese Verde (more on that later). Could it be that she wants to experience the same power and danger Saul does, not just with the cartel, but in all his illegal activity? She’s made it obvious by going to see Lalo that she is not afraid to get her hands dirty and she’s come to that conclusion far quicker than Jimmy ever did.

### ***The Domestic and Corporate***

Kim’s intertwining of her personal life and a legal issue in this scene is no different from the operations of the cartel, as they also combine the domestic with corporate operation. There is a business at hand, while also being deeply connected to family relations. Lalo is in New Mexico in the first place because of his uncle. It’s his duty to take control of the family business. In the same way, it’s Kim’s duty to watch out for Jimmy as her husband and as well as the law. The cartel is also an institution, and a male-dominated one at that. In confronting the cartel and the law, Kim is able to puncture the inherently male operation with her ability to understand it’s proceedings. When she tells Lalo Saul didn’t betray his trust, she’s proving that she understands the basic principles the cartel functions under. She’s an outsider with insider knowledge, and that gives her power in her and Lalo’s conversation. And, since viewers know that Kim holds power over the institution, I can argue that she has no need to respect the hierarchy of the cartel. As a woman, she is able to avoid the toxic masculinity that functions within a cartel as well. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan explain in *Literary Theory, An Anthology* that gender plays an

important role in societal status: “The subject of feminism was women’s experience under patriarchy, the long tradition of male rule in society which silenced women’s voices, distorted their lives, and treated their concerns as peripheral. To be a woman under such conditions was in some respects not to exist at all” (Rivkin and Ryan 894). Kim’s nonexistence to the cartel then makes her a non-threat in their eyes. So, when she shows knowledge of their exclusively male operation, she is able to exert her power because they do not expect her to have a voice. Her agency in context with the cartel means she is beyond the constraining male rules and politics that regulate it. She is simply able to approach the dynamics, something a man cannot do, because the dynamics were not built for her. She ultimately has the element of surprise and ability to sneak in, unnoticed.

Kim exemplifies this power even more at her and Lalo’s second meeting. After Jimmy finally does return home from his bagman trip, season five finale “Bad Choice Road,” sees Lalo’s exit from jail and arrival at Kim and Jimmy’s apartment door. Lalo explains that his men saw Jimmy’s car pushed off the road in the desert, making him assume that the trek through the desert Jimmy had told him about did not happen in the way he said it did. Lalo is angry at Jimmy’s untruthfulness. Jimmy continues to tell Lalo the same account of what happened, and he doesn’t buy it, so he makes Jimmy repeat it over and over again. Jimmy begins to look scared and weak next to Lalo. He isn’t sure what to do or say to get Lalo to leave the apartment. It’s obvious that his biggest concern in the scene is Kim. He doesn’t want her to get hurt, and perhaps feels guilty that she’s now dragged into the situation due to the spousal privilege of their marriage. He is once again treating her like a damsel that needs saving. Thankfully for his sake, Kim comes to his rescue this time. Kim physically moves her body in front of Jimmy as she confronts Lalo, telling him he’s out of line coming to their home and accusing Jimmy of

derailing his operation. Instead, she tells him, “you need to get your house in order,” (00:58:56 - 00:56:00) explaining to him that if he intends to run a business like his family’s cartel, then he needs to start worrying about his men and their trustworthiness. She also tells him that the next time he needs something delivered, it’s probably best if he doesn’t ask his lawyer to do it. Saul Goodman’s job does not involve picking up money in the desert. She even goes as far as to question Lalo’s intelligence in the matter, establishing dominance over him.

As Kim talks throughout the scene, she uses short, specific language as if she’s in court. She knows what she can’t say, so she works around it, being incredibly careful. Her comments indicate she is again very familiar with the inner-workings of the cartel and she also knows that Lalo and his men could have used a different method for their mission. His involvement with Saul overcomplicated the situation. She also tells Lalo that he is guilty of murder and that he hasn’t escaped those consequences just because he posted bail. She’s not afraid to call him a murderer to his face. As Kim gets bigger and bigger in the scene, Lalo begins to shrink. His language becomes shorter and he eventually allows Kim to dominate the conversation. He seems impressed by not just her ability to stand up to him, but also her ease and privilege in their dynamic. Kim’s tone is conversational and comfortable, as if she’s just arguing another case in court. Rivkin and Ryan explain that language is one of the most important things women have, but it can often be male dominant: “If all language carries worlds within it, assumptions and values that lie embedded in the simplest of utterances, then how can women take up such language, the language of patriarchy, and hope to use it to forge a better world for women” (897)? In thinking think Kim as having a sort of control of patriarchal language, then she has the ability to converse with a member of the cartel. She’s using his own speech against him, mentioning getting his house in order and telling him he was wrong to send his lawyer out for a

money drop. By speaking like a member of the cartel, Kim is establishing that she is Lalo's equal. She can't be afraid of him because she is just like him.

As Kim argues with Lalo, Jimmy stays back behind Kim, becoming the damsel in distress himself. Kim is the one who is protecting him because she is the character that holds the most power in the scene. Both Lalo and Jimmy could be thought of as reflections of Kim. A reflection character is someone who reflects the protagonist, echoing parts of the protagonist's characteristics, situation, or a way to make some sort of subtext more obvious. In this scene, Lalo and Jimmy reflect what Kim wants them to. She knows Jimmy is lying to Lalo about the events that happened in the desert. She's unaware of exactly what happened, but she knows her husband well enough to know that Lalo is correct; he is lying. However, by Kim defending Jimmy so easily without hesitation, she makes the men believe that Jimmy is actually telling the truth. Her power over both of them allows them to reflect the same story about the money drop. Even if they don't believe it, they are forced to because Kim makes such a compelling position for believing Jimmy. It's something she does a lot throughout the series—defend Jimmy—but this time she is able to convince a powerful cartel member that he is wrong. Lalo does not verbally respond to Kim about the story, he just silently leaves the apartment. This is certainly not the end of he and Kim's interactions, but she has once again exerted power over him. Although that can't make him happy, he has now accepted her as an equal sparring partner. He was also able to observe in this scene the power Kim has in her marriage, which means she is not constrained to typical gender norms. She is more powerful than her husband.

## Wexler v. Goodman

Jimmy's transition into Saul Goodman is ultimately the downfall of his relationship with Kim, allowing her to fully become the main focal point of the show as the character the audience sympathizes with and roots for. In embracing Saul, Jimmy becomes a foil to Kim. Part of this is Kim's appeal to an audience. The farther Jimmy dissolves into Saul, the harder he is to root for. The better Kim's sensibility and actions appear to an audience against Jimmy's. Part of Kim's appeal could be because she is a more relatable character than Jimmy. Audiences can see more of themselves in her. Of course, Kim is not without her faults. As I'll discuss in the next section, Kim goes on her own journey down Saul's dirty path. Her story, however, feels like one of almost triumph rather than defeat. Why is this? The Centre for Advocacy and Research's article "Contemporary Woman in Television Fiction: Deconstructing Role of 'Commerce' and 'Tradition'" may have some answers. The article dissects why audiences are drawn to the types of television shows they watch. They explain, "The popularity and appeal of TV serials/soaps for a large section of people are derived from the fact that various genres and components/programs are intrinsic to socio-cultural experience of the audience [Kumar 1981]" (1685). This seems obvious. Audiences look for narratives and characters that they see themselves in. Maybe it's a connection to a character's career, or position within the family. Many times, though, it's as simple as gender and what a character's actions can inspire in the audience that watches them.

Because *Better Call Saul* is a spinoff, it is automatically harder to root for Jimmy, knowing where his story will eventually take him. The show takes a very close attention to detail that any *Breaking Bad* fan is keen to notice. The show is nostalgic as is Jimmy. This is part of his character's appeal, but it also means that the audience may have a difficult time cheering him on, knowing that the effort won't necessarily do any good. Kim, however, is new and did not appear

in *Breaking Bad* (a detail many fans of the show agree means that she will ultimately be killed off by Lalo and the cartel at the end of *Saul's* run). And because of this alone she becomes a more interesting character than Jimmy. Even as she slowly creeps to the dark side of the law, the audience is able to stay invested in her narrative because they want to know what she does next. And they want to root for her to do something really great. Some might want her to ultimately choose the law, while others might secretly wish she'll choose Jimmy and corruption. No matter what side you're on, you're invested. Kim is the hero of the show because Jimmy can't be anymore.

Kim ultimately becomes a more important character than Jimmy because of her character traits. She's calculated and cunning, while still being kind and confident. Jimmy's insecurity and lack of identity make it hard for the audience to see him in control. As the Centre for Advocacy and Research points out, "Television has created a range of spectator positions for women. A key finding was that the strongest personality perception and aspiration to emerge from women consumers, in relation to ads featuring women, are those depicting women as 'bold' and 'independent'" (1685). Kim is certainly both of these things. And because she does them so well, she casts a shadow over any (although very little) of Jimmy's character growth. The audience sees Kim's growth as powerful, while any change that happens to Jimmy is seen as deceitful. In short, audiences are drawn to characters who will stand up for themselves no matter the circumstance. It's easy to picture Kim standing up for herself, but it's hard to think of the same for Jimmy. Especially when Kim is usually the one to come to his defense. If I go back to the examination of Kim and Jimmy's family unit, it's obvious that she controls their shared narrative, which is important considering this is not always the case for TV families:

Thus, the family is considered a site of domination, subordination and discrimination. The growing concern in the women's movement over the discriminatory nature of the family, especially towards women, has been accentuated by popular culture – films and entertainment TV. Feminists and others working for gender equality have accused both of playing a reactionary role as far as the portrayal and depiction of women and men are concerned. (1685)

Here, the centre's research points to the idea that whoever controls the family has power over the group's narrative and to control the narrative of more than just yourself is the ultimate television character glory.

### ***Spousal Privilege***

The audience sees this tension quite literally unfold in the season five episode appropriately titled, "Wexler Vs. Goodman." In it, the two lawyers go head to head on a case that they've secretly been deliberating about behind Mesa Verde's back. Kim has been instructed by Kevin and Paige to get Everett Acker to give up his land so Mesa Verde can build a new call center on it. Kim feels sympathy for Everett as he's being asked to give up his home and way of life. She wants to help him, but can't since she is technically on Mesa Verde's side. Jimmy steps in and offers Saul Goodman's services to Everett. He and Kim then come up with a plot to blackmail Kevin by exposing that Kevin's father may have stolen the Mesa Verde logo without permission in order to get Everett more of a settlement. At the last minute, Kim decides she doesn't want to go through with the plan, feeling that she can't in good conscience bend the rules of the law. She says she is even willing to pay the difference in the settlement to make sure Everette receives the money he is due. Jimmy agrees with her and they plan to go into the settlement meeting without enacting their plan. However, at said meeting Jimmy shocks

everyone in the room, including Kim, when he asks Kevin for a settlement of 4 million dollars. Everyone is stunned and upset, but eventually Kevin agrees to accept a settlement that includes cash for Everett and the original photographer that Mesa Verde stole their logo from. That night, Kim comes home to her and Jimmy's shared apartment and gives him the silent treatment as he tries to defend his actions, telling her that this way everyone was able to win. But Kim disagrees with him. For starters, she feels like Jimmy made her look bad in front of her bosses. But even more than that she feels like this was the first time when he was truly against her—the first time he didn't take her thoughts into consideration.

Kim remains silent for most of the scene, letting Jimmy nervously explain his side of the story and why he thinks the trick played out just fine. Kim's silence is a narrative device to give her the upper hand. The more time Jimmy has to talk, the more power Kim is gaining in their dynamic. A character of very few words anyway, Kim uses only her facial expressions and eyes to imply that she and Jimmy have come to a breaking point. The power here is that she decides this, not him. Jimmy continues to beg but Kim remains silent. She's not allowing his usual charm and charisma to sway her this time. Eventually she does speak, telling him, "You win, Jimmy..." (00:48:15 - 00:48:18). He tells her it's not about winning or losing, to which she replies "I don't trust you. You Played me. You made me the sucker" (00:48:31 - 00:48:42). Kim is vulnerable here. This is one of the only times in the show that she admits out loud to Jimmy that his questionable morals clash with hers. She is telling him that she refuses to be a pawn in his game anymore. Suddenly she is in control of the conversation and their relationship. She doesn't want him to try and protect her anymore. She wants to control their narrative and her own agency in the process. Jimmy begins to break down in the scene, realizing that he may have just ruined things with the woman who is the one constant in his life. Luckily for him, Kim continues to

control the situation by giving him an ultimatum: “Either we end this now and enjoy the time we had and go our separate ways or... maybe we get married” (00:50:05 - 00:50:31). Here, Kim is making the decision for them both, she is taking control of their shared narrative and coming up with a solution – spousal privilege.

By suggesting marriage to secure spousal privilege, Kim is enacting a way for her to know everything Jimmy does, without ever having to feel like a second thought. She is making it so that Jimmy will no longer be able to try and control her narrative by lying to her. By creating a legally binding trust around their relationship, Kim is giving herself the opportunity to potentially influence Jimmy’s actions and decisions. It’s possible that she believes that with spousal privilege she will be able to gain control over what Jimmy is doing and talk him out of any of his dangerous schemes. Like his interactions with Lalo, Kim is also refusing to be tricked by Jimmy, giving her the ultimate power in their relationship. Jimmy has been able to get by with his slick ways and ability to talk himself out of anything. That’s why he created his Saul Goodman character—a persona he can slip into so he can get what he wants from people. Kim, however, will not let him hide things from her or hold her back anymore. She is immune to Saul Goodman, which means she transcends the very narrative of the show, creating a space for her own narrative to become the focal point of the story. Like in their conversation about the Mesa Verde settlement, Kim is the one who exercises control over Jimmy. She stays silent until he has run out of things to say. When she does speak, she is the one who comes to a conclusion about their relationship and she is the one who ultimately gets to decide that staying together is better than the alternative. Audiences are drawn to characters in control of their destiny, as well as characters that others will listen to and follow.

## *Head of Household*

Kim also breaks the gendered television stereotype that the man is always in charge of the household: “The women in the narrative structure of the soaps, are either the victims of the conflicts within the family or the agents of its troubles” (1688). This statement is an interesting one, considering that women can either be victims or agents, but not necessarily leaders. The phrase “agents of its troubles” in itself feels gendered because it’s implications are negative. But if viewers look at Kim and Jimmy’s household, they can see this notion re-gendered as Kim is the problem-solving leader, while Jimmy is the one who ignites chaos. She often has to pick up his messes or change the situation so

The connection to Kim is ultimately stronger because the audience cares about what becomes of her. As I said, the audience already know where Jimmy ends up in *Breaking Bad* and the type of character he becomes. And because the audience knows this, they feel no real need to spend a lot of time rallying behind him. His fate is already sealed. Kim’s future is a mystery, giving the audience endless possibilities to think about and discuss about her fate and, more importantly, the character she is going to be at the show’s end. As Kim’s importance to the show has grown throughout five seasons, so has her importance to the overall structure and integrity of the show: “In many instances, television fiction employs the idiom of empowerment to draw attention to the day-to-day disagreements and conflicts that exist and develop between women and men within the family and outside it. This conflictual process not only brings women to the forefront of the narrative, but also by default, involves etching out the male characters and their reactions to the constant shifts in the pattern of responsibilities” (1686). In Kim and Jimmy's conflictual process” she is the one who carries more importance, bringing her to the forefront. And as her importance grows, Jimmy’s decreases. The show’s narrative continues to be

sustainable because Kim is still moving towards something, while Jimmy has already chosen a path. It's not to say that one is a better character than the other, because Jimmy is certainly entertaining in his own right. But the true definition of a protagonist is a character that leads the narrative and who is an advocate of a particular idea or way of thinking. Kim leads all of the show's causes, whether it be for the law, or for Jimmy. She is the force that is making the audience still pay attention to Jimmy. She is the character that assigns meaning to Jimmy's. And, if you believe passionate fans on the Internet, her potential demise for giving him that meaning will ultimately turn him into the sleazy lawyer from *Breaking Bad*. Kim is what inspires Jimmy.

If the audience thinks of Kim as our true protagonist, then they must think of her as the moral compass of the show, as most protagonists are typically portrayed as having a strong desire to do the right or just thing. She usually serves as a moral compass for Jimmy, so acting as one for the audience should be no different. She is the character that anchors the show: "Within this narrative structure (with conflict as the hook) both traditional as well as modern symbols are used. There is a deliberate selection of values, some affirmed, some dismissed and change is 'packaged' to ensure a convenient degree of modification whereby the family as an institution remains unchallenged, even though individuals may be affected in different ways" (1688). Kim is that unchallenged source of stability in *Better Call Saul*. It's her values, model, and symbols that drive other characters, the audience, and the show itself. She is unchallenged in the face of Jimmy's antics, making her immune to the sway his character has. Like many great protagonists before her, she stands up for what she believes in. She does not falter or allow herself to be persuaded by Jimmy or any of the other characters in the show. Kim has a hero's journey because the audience sees her as the most truthful character, one they can put stock in and continue to be interested in and entertained by. She serves as the audience's guide through a

complicated story that features complicated plots and moral dilemmas. Viewers always feel confident in Kim's decisions because she has rarely changed, just grown. But because Kim is such a complex character on her own, she also complicates the show's very definition of what is good and bad because she is the core of the narrative.

## **Wexler v. The Law**

Audiences typically see female characters experience dangerous situations as damsels in distress. Only the male hero is allowed to be reckless in order to save the damsel's life. They are nothing more than an object that needs that saving. For Kim, however, she is only involved with the cartel because of Jimmy. She had to go to Lalo in order to fight for her husband, a situation that is usually reversed, making Jimmy the damsel that needs saving. It may have been reckless to lie about being Lalo's attorney to confront him in jail, but she was doing it for Jimmy. Further, she is speaking on behalf of her husband when she visits Lalo in jail as well as when he visits her apartment. In her recklessness, Kim is the one who potentially puts her family in danger, which means she will need to be the one to solve her and Jimmy's cartel problem. Of course, if predictions are correct about Kim's fate in the upcoming final season of the show, in order to truly end this problem, Kim may need to die. After all, a hero has to make sacrifices. And the ultimate sacrifice for her family might be her life.

In being reckless in order to do what's right for their family, Kim is taking on the role of an antihero like Jimmy. An antihero is a character who lacks traditional hero traits. Although Kim might not fit this definition when viewers first meet her, by the fifth season of the show she becomes an antihero by blurring the lines between right and wrong—something audiences haven't seen the character do before on her own. She's let Jimmy lead her there plenty of times, but

plotting against Howard and HHM at the end of season five is the first time she's allowed to scheme, and her ideas scare even Jimmy. She's finally allowed to be like other characters in the *Breaking Bad* universe – *bad*. She's the one who worries Jimmy. She's the one who wants to seek revenge, not because she can gain anything from it, but because she wants to have fun at the expense of someone else who has also done bad things. Moreso, Kim is finally getting the opportunity to behave like the men around her. She sticks to a strict moral compass in the early seasons of the show, rolling her eyes at her male counterparts who bend the rules of the law to always ensure that they win. Kim is finally given the chance to win, and do so by her own accord. She has motivations that are parallel to what Jimmy sees and wants, but this time she is the driving force that is going after those things to ensure her family's protection. Kim does what Skylar White was never allowed to do; she controls her narrative.

### ***Something Unforgivable***

As with the stockbroker incident in season two or when Kim helps Jimmy after he switches the addresses on Chuck's Mesa Verde paperwork, viewers see a glimpse of Kim's dark side toward the end of season five. This time, however, she seems to take things to a place where even Jimmy is a little afraid to go. She is the one who wants to seek revenge on someone, just for the sake of revenge, making her the character acting recklessly. And her recklessness is directly related to defending Jimmy. In the season finale, "Something Unforgivable," after Kim confronts Lalo, she and Jimmy stay at a hotel for a couple of days to make sure Lalo isn't going to come back for them. Jimmy, feeling guilty, asks Kim, "am I bad for you" (00:03:41 - 00:03:44)? She responds, brushing him off: "You crossed a line. You're not going to do it again" (00:04:22 - 00:04:32)? Her response comes off more as a statement than a question. She doesn't seem to be as worried about Lalo as Jimmy is. He feels like this is because of her lack of knowledge of the

cartel, but Kim is anything but innocent when it comes to organized crime. Still, Jimmy begs her to skip work and stay at the hotel with him for the day. She refuses saying, “we need to keep our eyes open and go on with our lives” (00:13:10 - 00:13:13). Kim then heads to the courthouse where she accepts 20 new pro bono cases from the public defender’s office, telling them she has officially quit Mesa Verde and is looking for a juicy case she can focus her time on. While at the courthouse Kim runs into Howard and tells him she’s done with Mesa Verde. Howard is upset by this, telling her that he thinks it’s Jimmy’s fault—that he’s been a bad influence on her. This does not sit well with Kim and she once again defends Jimmy.

What the audience sees in this episode are several instances in which Kim is questioned about her relationship with Jimmy. It’s clear that other characters find that she is too good for him, or at least her standards for what is moral and just are higher than his. One could argue that it is Jimmy’s fault that Kim has now become entangled with the cartel or that it’s his fault she’s suddenly become interested in difficult public defender cases. However, Kim proves that she is not being influenced by Jimmy, but rather inspired by him. Later in the episode, she comes back to their hotel room where she tells Jimmy she thinks Howard needs to be “taken down a peg” (00:38:14 - 00:38:16). She suggests they do something at first to his beloved hair: “suppose we slip him a mickey, and then while he’s out, we get out the old electric clippers, and shave him bald” (00:38:48 - 00:39:00). Her and Jimmy go back and forth about all the silly things they could do to get back at Howard for his comments: Nair in his shampoo bottle, replace tanning oil with sunscreen, replace his toilet paper with one-ply. Then Kim asks, “what if Howard does something terrible” (00:40:17 - 00:40:21)? She suggests some kind of misconduct, like misappropriating funds or bribing clients, something that could lead to a big settlement from the Sandpiper retirement homes—money that Jimmy has been waiting on for several seasons now.

Jimmy shakes his head and tells Kim he's already tried and failed several times to get his money early. "You went about it wrong," she tells him. "Sorry, but this is how you do it" (00:41:29 - 00:41:33). Jimmy still isn't buying her plan. He says Howard would have to do "something unforgivable" (00:55:25 - 00:55:27) for Sandpiper to settle early, and that would just never happen. Kim shrugs and contemplates if it's really that big of deal: "We're talking about a career setback for one lawyer..." (00:55:54 - 00:56:03). Jimmy is now appalled by his wife: "Kim, doing this... it's not you. You would not be OK with it. Not in the cold light of day" (00:56:11 - 00:56:23). She replies, "Wouldn't I" (00:56:27 - 00:56:28)? And just like that, Kim Wexler has become Saul Goodman 2.0.

It's important to point out her reasoning for wanting to break the law and extort Howard, though. She's not necessarily doing it for herself. Although Howard's comments about Jimmy upset her, and although she mentions the Sandpiper money would be nice to have if she's going to be starting her own public defender business, she isn't focused on any huge gain just for her. Instead, she's wanting this for Jimmy. She wants to break the law to help Jimmy get his money, along with him getting the satisfaction of seeing Howard fail. But a plot to trick Howard and receive the Sandpiper money early could also mean that Jimmy will dissolve his association with Lalo and the cartel. Kim hopes that if Jimmy has enough money, he can start his life over and be truly happy. What she gains then is a normal life with a normal husband. Although I wouldn't go as far as to say that this thinking is selfish, I do think Kim is once again challenging gender norms by being willing to do a horrible thing for the sake of her family, which will benefit both her and her husband. In breaking the law, Kim sees a way to preserve her life with Jimmy, keeping their family unit as her number one priority. She is doing what any male protector would do for their family.

### *The Antihero*

By being willing to challenge the law and take on the role of Jimmy's protector, Kim ultimately re-genders what it means for a woman to participate in crime. Unlike Skylar White, Kim earns a sort of respect from the audience because she doesn't want to be a wife on the sidelines. And she's not just going along with and defending Jimmy's plans, she's coming up with her own schemes, creating a criminal identity that could be separate from Jimmy's. During their intense discussion about Howard in "Something Unforgivable," Jimmy is mostly joking about ruining Howard's career. Kim, however, seems to be serious. One could argue that her goal is to seek revenge on Howard for his criticism of her career and choices (i.e. Jimmy). After all, that would make sense given the close ties between identity and work in law. On the other hand, she could be trying to confirm to herself that she identifies more with someone like Jimmy who is willing to break the law than someone like Howard who tries to uphold it. Does Kim actually enjoy breaking the law? This would make sense as it is something that bonds her to Jimmy. It's something they do together, something Jimmy can't keep secret from her.

Of course, any sort of disregard for the law comes with a sense of power. Female characters rarely get to take control of a narrative that's driven by male characters: "Some current feminists argue that these psychological and concomitant cultural strengths give women a capacity for a uniquely critical perspective on the dominant culture, which is created and determined largely by the men who hold positions of power within it and are responsible for reproducing it and which bears strongly the mark of male values such as hierarchy and competition" (Press 64). Here, Press argues that women can be critical of male-driven narratives because they possess the ability to understand how men construct social and lawful rules and expectations. Part of this is then also being able to take the control of those things away from

male characters. Kim gets a sense of empowerment from being on the same playing field as Jimmy, the main character. Committing a crime allows Kim to be seen as a character who possesses power over her own narrative. She does not need to completely rely on Jimmy's narrative to find meaning. Having her own motivations for destroying Howard means that Kim's story is not solely driven by how Jimmy's mistakes have altered her life. Rather, she is able to have her own agency because she is willing to do something to Howard that Jimmy is not willing to do. And taking it a step further, she has an advantage over a character like Howard who traditionally holds power within the law and the institution because he would never consider crime as a solution to a problem. Doing something that threatens someone else's career to exert your power over them is something that Howard might understand, however. He kept Jimmy out of HHM for years to help Chuck carry out his disdain for his brother, and he kept Kim in document review during season two to punish her for associating with and supporting Jimmy. Howard is no stranger to manipulation. He uses it to show his power over other characters all the time. But what ultimately gives Kim power over Howard is the fact that she is no longer worried about her reputation. She is only interested in moving forward in a life with Jimmy, not dwelling on what others might think of her or what career opportunities might be presented to her if she stays "good." Viewers see this as she quits her job with Mesa Verde and plans to become a full-time public defender. She is no longer concerned with what someone like Howard might think of her. She is only concerned with moves that allow her to keep her power. Female characters often have to be concerned with how their actions affect others. Their purpose is to be there for other characters. Although Kim offers this type of support for Jimmy, she is refusing to offer it to anyone else because that means her agency is controlled by someone else. In embracing a world

in which she can blur the lines between good and bad, Kim is allowed to have full control over her narrative.

Part of this narrative control includes inserting herself into cartel affairs. Although she handles herself well, Kim is being reckless entangling her narrative with Lalo's. But, being reckless is not something female characters are traditionally allowed to do. Although I cannot necessarily compare Kim Wexler to Walter White, she is at least allowed to be comparable to him. Jimmy has always been told he's inherently bad. He's told that by Chuck, by Howard, and eventually himself. He embraces his antihero status because it's what every other character has assigned to him. He assumes this must be his rightful path. And, he's often rewarded – or at least gets what he wants – when he is playing that role. Jimmy is embracing a life of crime because he was forced out of the law. Kim, on the other hand, has been praised by her bosses at Mesa Verde for being a stellar lawyer. She's been rewarded for leaving HHM and working hard to impress others in banking law. In a way, by telling her she's too good to associate with Jimmy, Howard is complimenting her goodness. Kim has finally obtained the ultimate lawyerly goal; respect. But, she isn't satisfied with that. Instead, she wants the freedom to be like Jimmy – someone who doesn't need the law's praise to feel fulfilled. Kim is after more than that. She wants to be in control. She wants agency over her narrative, and part of that agency involves turning away from what is lawfully right. She no longer wants to be controlled by the law, which means she is free from caring about how a lawyer should act. And caring about how a traditional wife character should act.

If Kim is in full control of her narrative, that means she is also taking control of Jimmy's. By visiting Lalo in jail and helping Jimmy lie to him about what happened at the desert money drop, Kim has now taken on the responsibility of protecting her husband. She may not be

successful in trying to protect him, but now Jimmy's destiny is tied to Kim's narrative. This could become especially true if she does die in the final season of the show. Whatever Kim's fate will be, she will catapult Jimmy into his full Saul Goodman transformation. She therefore becomes the main character of the narrative – whatever happens to Jimmy/Saul is because of Kim. She is what has motivated most of Jimmy's silly schemes, and her presence, or lack of presence, will decide what motivates Jimmy to become fully bad. Jimmy then has no choice in his fate, while Kim is choosing to be bad. Audiences have seen this before with the story of Walter White. He broke the law to protect his family, but he eventually succumbs to the glimmer of a life of crime. Kim may just pay the price for her choices like Walter did, but at least she'll have the satisfaction of being a female character who had ultimate power over her own choices and story.

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