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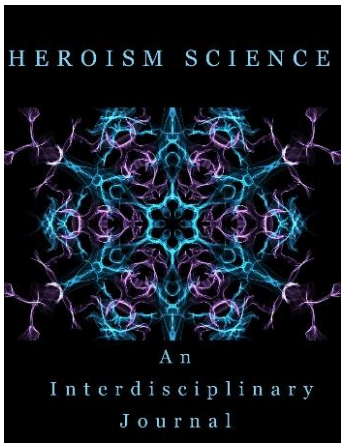

There Goes My Antihero: How Wendy Byrde Broke Bad

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ABSTRACT: Despite the increase of male antiheroes in popular culture, the number of female antiheroes is sparse, particularly when female characters are romantically involved with male antiheroes. There are several reasons for this disparity, partially which can be explained by affective disposition theory. First, female characters are rarely given agency and adequate backstories. Second, in order for female characters to be antiheroes, they typically must challenge gender role stereotypes, especially as they pertain to motherhood. Finally, they are often treated poorly by other characters in the series. All of these reasons have a profound effect on how audiences perceive female characters and whether or not they will accept morally ambiguous behavior from them. In Netflix's Ozark, however, Wendy Byrde is different. This paper explores Wendy's partnership with her husband and how it is established early in the series, thus contributing to Wendy's agency. Because of the agency she is afforded, Wendy successfully challenges gender role stereotypes and achieves antihero status.

KEYWORDS: *Ozark, Breaking Bad, antihero, affective disposition theory, gender*

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the early 2000s, the male antihero could be seen all over television: Jax Teller (*Sons of Anarchy*), Dexter Morgan (*Dexter*), and Walter White (*Breaking Bad*), to name a few. During this same time period, the number of female antiheroes was sparse, particularly on broadcast and basic cable television networks. There were several reasons for this disparity. First and foremost, female characters were rarely given agency or adequate backstories, which greatly limited the degree to which audiences could relate to them. Second, female characters were often treated poorly by other characters in the series, namely the male antihero, whom audiences had grown to like. In turn, audiences took cues from this treatment, ultimately siding with the male protagonist. Finally, by acting like an antihero, female characters were forced to challenge gender role stereotypes, especially as they pertained to motherhood, and in doing so, audiences responded negatively to this behavior. This paper examines these points in greater detail and investigates how Wendy Byrde and Ruth Langmore, two female characters from Netflix's *Ozark*, were able to achieve antihero status. First, in order to better understand why an audience enjoys *any* narrative, we turn to affective disposition theory (ADT).

2 AFFECTIVE DISPOSITION THEORY: LAWS OF ATTRACTION

ADT refers to a set of explanations for why a viewer enjoys a certain piece of entertainment. Throughout a narrative, viewers make moral judgements about characters, affecting their enjoyment of the narrative. According to ADT, enjoyment is a function of a viewer's reaction to a) the characters, b) the successes and failures of the characters, and c) the outcomes experienced by the characters. Unsurprisingly, the theory predicts that enjoyment increases when characters liked by the viewer experience positive outcomes and

when characters disliked by the audience experience negative outcomes. Arthur A. Raney (2017) notes:

> Thus, broadly speaking, the theory is composed of three psychological processes or components: the dispositions formed and held toward characters, emotional reactivity to the plights of those characters, and the viewer's hedonic response to the ultimate resolution of the narrative. Empathy and morality play primary roles in these processes and help to explain variance in emotional responses to and enjoyment of media entertainment across viewers. (1)

As noted by Raney, empathy and morality play an important role in ADT. Typically, viewers expect principled heroes to be rewarded and immoral villains to be punished, both of which relate to the degree in which a character is liked or a narrative is enjoyed. Ultimately, according to Daniel M. Shafer and Raney (2012), "Moral evaluation of the outcomes portrayed, especially in terms of expected justice restoration, governs the enjoyment we experience" (1029). In sum, ADT helps explain why people generally love narratives featuring heroes, but it does not fully explain why people enjoy narratives featuring antiheroes, a character who is often immoral and has characteristics of both a hero and villain.

The characteristics of an antihero are widely discrepant from what viewers associate as the characteristics of a hero. An antihero is "a character who is our primary point of ongoing narrative alignment but whose behavior and beliefs provoke ambiguous, conflicted, or negative moral allegiance" (Mittell 2015, 142-43). Nonetheless, antiheroes *do* have "certain heroic qualities (exceptional agency, they receive admiration and make sacrifices), but are guided by immoral standards" (Oliver et al. 2019, 191). Unlike a villain, an antihero is characterized by a certain amount of ambiguity, making it a distinct category and worthy of study (West 2001, 139).

Raney argues that viewers can form a positive opinion of characters before they start doing immoral activities. Viewers who initially deem characters likeable allow the characters more room to stray; in other words, viewers stop judging the moral disposition of characters after a certain amount of time (Raney 2006). This allows viewers to separate characters' questionable behaviors from their feelings toward them and is one possible reason why antiheroes are often well-liked by audiences. In regard to the antiheroes listed above, Jax Teller, Dexter Morgan, and Walter White were all presented as sympathetic characters from the start of their respective series. For example, in the pilot episode of *Sons of Anarchy*, Jax is mourning the loss of his father and was recently separated from his wife who happens to be addicted to methamphetamine. In the pilot episode of *Dexter*, Dexter murders a child killer and pedophile, saving other children from being murdered and molested. Finally, in the pilot episode of *Breaking Bad,* Walter is diagnosed with lung cancer and is worried how he will pay for treatment and support his family on a high school chemistry teacher's salary.

All three series provide time and space for viewers to empathize with the male antihero before he engages in questionable behavior. As noted by Raney, this time and space allows those who watch antihero narratives to separate the antihero's questionable moral behavior and begin to like them (Raney 2006). In a study conducted by Shafer and Raney (2012), while viewers perceived heroes as more moral than antiheroes, by the end of the film, the amount they liked each did not differ. This is further proof that viewers were able to "separate the antihero's morally questionable actions from their feelings toward them" (Shafer and Raney 2012, 1034). Given this process, why do audiences have a difficult time suspending their judgement of female antiheroes? Why do some female characters achieve antihero status and others do not? For example, why does Skyler White fail to achieve antihero status but Wendy Byrde does?

3 BREAKING BAD VS. OZARK: I AM THE ONE WHO KNOCKS

Netflix's *Ozark* has been often compared to AMC's *Breaking Bad,* and after a quick review of their IMDb plot summaries, it is easy to see why. *Ozark* follows Marty Byrde, a middle-aged accountant turned money launder for a Mexican drug cartel. At least to a degree, his story parallels Walter White in *Breaking Bad,* a high school chemistry teacher turned methamphetamine producer who eventually ends up working for a drug cartel. Both are married, and eventually, their wives Wendy (Marty) and Skyler (Walter) become involved in the family business. Both men have local youth working for them: Ruth (Marty) and Jesse (Walter). Upon closer inspection, however, this is where the similarities between the series end. Despite ongoing disagreements, Marty and Wendy have a partnership; while it is often problematic and fraught with angst, they both have agency. It is a true collaboration. The same cannot be said for Walter and Skyler.

Unlike Skyler and to a lesser extent Jesse, Wendy's actions and Ruth's actions are not dependent on Marty's; furthermore, they have backstories and are admired by other characters in the series. On the other hand, Skyler is often ridiculed by Walter, including a very infamous episode where he calls her a bitch, a memorable moment on cable television. The audience takes cues from this treatment. Even though Walter is more villain than antihero at this moment, the audience still connects with his character because they were encouraged to do so from the beginning of the series. This connection, as supported by ADT, suppresses any feelings of discomfort brought on by Walter's morally corrupt behavior, including the mistreatment of his wife. On the other hand, *Ozark* gives viewers time and space to connect with *all* of their main characters, including Wendy and Ruth, which is what ultimately elevates them to antihero status.

4 INDEPENDENT WOMEN: WHY AGENCY IS SO IMPORTANT

While Wendy is romantically involved with Marty, unlike Skyler White in *Breaking Bad*, she has agency throughout the entire series. For example, in one of the earlier episodes of *Breaking Bad*, Skyler has an affair to get back at Walter for starting his methamphetamine empire. In the very first episode of *Ozark*, Wendy has an affair because she wanted to have one. At that point in the series, Wendy wasn't even aware Marty was laundering money. This isn't the only way in which Wendy has agency. Her agency is not limited to her body. Throughout the series, she becomes critical to the money laundering operation and offers suggestions for improvement and even growth. According to Laura Linney, the actor who plays Wendy, "Everything stems from survival. [In Season 2], she goes to a very primal place in which to do that. She sees places that are not being filled and realizes she's gotta fill it and she's gotta do it fast. But she's impatient" (Travers 2018). It is this impatience that causes some friction between her and Marty; despite this friction, however, she never loses her agency.

By season three, Wendy is making decisions without consulting Marty, decisions that have a serious impact on their business and their relationship with the cartel. For example, while Wendy wants to grow their empire and connections to the cartel, Marty wants out. When he questions her, she proceeds with her plans anyway and buys another casino to add to the cartel's portfolio. During an exchange with the owner of the casino, she proclaims, "I took back my life, and I answer to only one person" (Dabis 2020b). She encourages the casino owner to do the same. At this point in the series, she is widely ambitious and, at times, overly confident. "We can run this god damn place," Wendy screams at Marty (Bateman 2020b). She appears to thrive in this environment, enjoying being a key player of a growing empire. In addition, in this same season, Wendy begins talking directly to Navarro, the head of the cartel, and he approves of her vision for the future. Her brother Ben notices how happy

Wendy is after an exchange with Navarro; he comments, "This is the first time I've recognized my sister in years" (Bateman 2020a). It is clear she enjoys being an integral part of the business – to the point she is thriving. At one point she even tells Ben, "Because fighting for our life makes every other thing you did before seem extremely dull" (Sakharov 2020b).

She appreciates that her skills are put to good use and that her ambition does not go unnoticed; she becomes somewhat of a confidant to Navarro. He begins to call her regularly to ask for advice. In season three, episode three, Wendy tells Helen, the cartel's lawyer, that she and Ruth can launder money without Marty. In response, Helen assures her she is a rising star, and it is clear this praise pleases Wendy. In Wendy's dream sequence two episodes later, she sings, "I believe it is time for me to fly" (Dabis 2020b). Given their differing viewpoints, it is no surprise this causes friction between her and Marty. At one point, in season three, Marty screams, "I want you to admit this is all about you" (Bateman 2020a). Fans may disagree with Wendy, even frown upon the choices she makes. Unlike the failed female antiheroes before her such as Skyler White, her choices are uniquely hers. Near the end of season three, after a particularly difficult month, Wendy realizes that her partnership with Marty is what matters. She acknowledges that Marty may have been right when he wanted to get out of the money laundering business and run. This is not defeat on her part, however, as Marty acknowledges that Wendy may have been right when she wanted to grow the business. This give and take is absent in *Breaking Bad*.

In addition to Wendy, Ruth is also provided agency throughout the series. For a greater part of *Ozark*, one could argue that Marty trusts her more than he trusts Wendy; she is that integral to the operation, including managing the strip club in season two and riverboat casino in season three where the Byrds launder most of their money. This requires her to make timely decisions and at times run interference, helping Marty dodge both the FBI and

the Kansas City mafia. Ruth holds her own amongst cartel agents, FBI agents, and murderers; in season two, for example, she is waterboarded by cartel agents, but never reveals any sensitive information (Abraham and Bateman 2018). Throughout the series, the choices she makes are hers, including her choice to quit working for the Byrds at the end of season three.

During key moments of the series, such as her departure in season three, viewers are able to connect with Ruth. In season two, they see the impact the torture has on her, and they are able to sympathize with her and understand her decision-making process. Because they are able to sympathize, they do not feel angry when she disagrees with Marty and Wendy, the primary characters of the series, or when she goes out on her own. She not only has agency throughout the entire series but also a backstory. Backstories are a key component for connecting characters to audiences.

5 EMPATHIZING WITH AN ANTIHERO: THE POWER OF A BACKSTORY

Over the years, there have been several female characters that *could have* been antiheroes, yet they do not receive the same reception as other characters, namely male antiheroes. Since many antiheroes are male, some critics have argued that viewers' enjoyment hinges on the representation of masculinity within these narratives (Rosenberg 2013; Lotz 2014), "which often works to mask morally bankrupt behavior" (Hagelin and Silverman 2017, 851). Female characters are typically expected to adhere to gender role stereotypes, most of which run counter to the characteristics of antiheroes. This is particularly true of female characters who are mothers. These characters are repeatedly disempowered through motherhood (Vosen Callens 2016), as the ideals surrounding motherhood—that one must be nurturing, moral, and caring at all times— run counter to the antihero narrative. Because dominant ideology plays a significant role in shaping the audiences' perception of a character, Jason Mittell (2015) questions whether a woman can ever be an antihero; he writes,

a morally questionable female character is typically seen as "an unsympathetic 'ball-busting bitch' than the charismatic rogue that typifies most male antiheroes" (150). Often, the only time in which female characters are "allowed" to engage in questionable, and perhaps immoral, behavior is when they do so to protect their children.

Per ADT, character development is central to explaining why audiences like morally ambiguous characters, characters who may run counter to previously supported architypes and stereotypes. According to Sophie Janicke and Arthur A. Raney (2015), "Thus, in contrast to traditional hero narratives, identification with, and sympathy for, antiheroes made possible through moral disengagement are key ingredients for the enjoyment of narratives containing such protagonists" (494). In part, character development is key to seeing female characters as complex individuals as opposed to only a mother, wife, or sister.

Both Wendy and Ruth have a backstory, and there are multiple reasons why a viewer would feel sympathy for either of them. For example, viewers learn very early in the series that Wendy is a former political strategist for some prominent politicians including former President Obama. After moving to Missouri, Wendy quickly learns how her skill set is useful in this new environment, and throughout these moments, viewers learn more Wendy's interest, skills, and values. Unlike Wendy, in *Breaking Bad*, we know very little about Skyler. Throughout the series, most of Skyler's time is spent talking to or about Walter (Vosen Callens 2016); notably, the series barely passes the Bechdel test, a test that measures if a film or television show has at least two female characters that talk to each about something other than a man (Cox 2013). *Ozark*, however, passes the Bechdel test given the prominent role Wendy plays in the business as well as the backstory she is provided.

In season one, the audience learns more about Wendy's personal life, making her a more sympathetic character. Early in her marriage to Marty, Wendy has a miscarriage after a terrible car accident. The miscarriage, along with her struggle to regain prominence as a

political strategist, causes her to fall into a deep depression. As a result, when presented with the opportunity to launder money for the cartel, Marty accepts with reservations (Kuras 2017). While one might argue that this episode places blame on Wendy for Marty's choice to enter into a relationship with the cartel, thus decreasing her likability with the audience, it does just the opposite. It provides a way for the audience to connect with her on another level, to better understand her decision-making process. Ultimately, the accident and subsequent miscarriage allow viewers to suspend their moral judgement of both Wendy and Marty.

Viewers are reminded of this pivotal moment throughout the series, and importantly, we see the miscarriage through Wendy's eyes – not Marty's eyes. Even in season three, it is clear Wendy is still reeling from the loss of their baby. In the season finale of season three, she asks Marty, "Do you ever think about the baby we lost?" (Sakharov 2020a); to her dismay, Marty says he does not. However, Wendy says she does, stating how she often wonders what the baby would have been like and how the baby's presence would have affected their older children. This is a raw moment in the series and likely one that many viewers would identify with as the number of miscarriages in the United States is thought to be somewhere between 10 and 20 percent ("Miscarriage"). The miscarriage is a life altering moment for the Byrds, particularly Wendy, a moment in which most viewers are likely to empathize or sympathize.

Viewers also might connect with Wendy because of the number of great sacrifices she has made throughout her life. In season three, audiences learn Wendy missed working when she stayed home with the children and struggled to manage these emotions. This is a common feeling for mothers, and this subplot helps audiences feel more connected to her. Furthermore, in season three, viewers meet Wendy's brother Ben, which helps the audience better understand Wendy during this time period (through the eyes of Ben) as well as her

childhood growing up. The viewers learn of Ben's bipolar disorder diagnosis and what that has meant for Wendy over the years, including making the difficult decision to institutionalize him when he stopped taking his medication. 11.2 percent of adults over 18 in the United States report having regularly anxiety, and 4.7 percent of adults over 18 in the United States report having depression (National Center 2020, 18-20). Those in this population, and those who love this population, are likely to relate to Wendy's struggles despite the fact each mental health diagnosis is different and nuanced. By providing a backstory, Wendy is not disempowered by motherhood; she is not beholden to gender role stereotypes. She represents a realistic and multifaceted portrayal of the issues facing mothers today.

Wendy is not the only woman who has sacrificed for her family. Ruth has as well. Like Wendy, she has a backstory. She grew up in a notorious family; her family is known as thieves around the small tourist town. Ruth grew up under extremely difficult circumstances. Her father was in prison for most of her young life, and when he is out of prison, he causes further problems for the family. In an interview, Julia Garner, the actor who plays Ruth, reflects on Ruth's troubled past. She stated, "Maybe she would be better if she grew up in a different house, but there are certain things you question, like, 'Wow, she really did that.' Is it nature? Is it nurture? I don't know. I think Ruth wants to be acknowledged and never gets acknowledged. I think that's why she was drawn to Marty in the first place, to be seen in a way she's never been seen" (Travers 2018). These questions are questions that the audience is likely to ask throughout the series in regard to Ruth.

Even though she is not their mother, Ruth tries to take on a motherly role to her two cousins, Wyatt and Three, shielding them from her uncles' and father's bad behavior. For example, one of the main reasons Ruth takes a job working for Marty, despite her own reservations, is to ensure her cousin Wyatt stays out of trouble and can go to college – and

not just any college but Mizzou, a top university in her area. It is very clear in season one this is her top priority. She believes he is intelligent and often sacrifices her own best interests for Wyatt's. In season two, she goes so far to kill her own uncles, as she is worried about how their actions might affect Marty's business and thus her ability to support Wyatt and Three. While some may disagree with her choice, it is clear she thought what she was doing was best for her cousins. She knows she and her cousins have been dealt some difficult life circumstances, but she ultimately keeps fighting.

Ruth has often been compared to Jesse Pinkman, Walter White's former student and methamphetamine cook partner. In *Breaking Bad*, ultimately Pinkman turns on White, as he is riddled with guilt and feels remorse for their actions. In *Ozark*, the same happens at the end of season three; although, Ruth's future is yet to be determined. As of this publication, season four has not been released. After feeling underappreciated and unprotected, Ruth cuts ties with the Byrdes. In season four, it likely will be the Byrdes against Ruth, but because the audience has already connected with Ruth, she is not likely to lose her antihero status. According to Mary Oliver et al. (2019), "when anti-heroes engage with us directly, we may instead join forces with them, experience greater identification, and hence like them despite their transgressions" (197). At the end of season three, Ruth is seemingly engaging with the audience, inviting them to also cut ties with the Byrdes too, questioning their motivations.

Of note, both Wendy and Ruth's backstories not only help audiences connect with both Wendy and Ruth, but also the backstories help push back against the gender role stereotyping that has plagued other probable female antihero narratives. Audiences see Wendy and Ruth as individuals, as whole people – not just a mother or, in the case of Ruth, a pseudo-mother. In other series such as *Breaking Bad*, motherhood is used as a way to oppress female characters, as these characters are upheld to an unrealistic motherly ideal. Anna Gunn (2013), the actor who played Skyler White, wrote a *New York Times* op-ed piece on the topic.

She states, “But 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.”

Other actors have also noticed this. Natalie Dormer, *Game of Thrones*, stated in an interview with *Flare* magazine, “We don’t have enough young, female antiheroes. We don’t accept women as antiheroes the way we do the men unless there’s a family get-out clause” (Higgins 2014). Citing Katy Segal’s character in *Sons of Anarchy*, she reflects, “We accept women being complete c-nts if they’re doing it for a child” (Higgins 2014). So why doesn’t the audience respond more positively to Skyler in season five, when she threatens to leave Walter? In a heated exchange, Walter calls her bluff: "What are you going to do? What, are you going to run off to France? Are you going to close the curtains, change the locks? This is a joke. Come on, Skyler! You want to take me on? You want to take away my children? What’s the plan?" (Johnson 2012). Skyler responds that all she can realistically do is wait – implying she is helpless and must wait for Walter’s death (an outcome that is likely not to be embraced by audiences). In this moment, Skyler argues she needs to protect the children, and one would assume the audience would feel sympathy for her. It is this very admission, however, that ultimately endites her, as the audience is reminded of her motherhood and left to wonder *why* she exposed them to Walter’s drug empire in the first place and *why* she doesn’t just leave. While Wendy also considers leaving Marty on more than one occasion, she does so because she wants to take the business in a different direction; her actions are not a direct response to Marty’s, and the audience, while they may not agree with her, understand her motivation. The audience is not immediately reminded of her motherhood, and through more developed script writing, they are better able to identify why Wendy wants to leave.

Wendy and Ruth are generally more accepted because audiences have had an opportunity to connect with their characters early on in the series, learning more about them as people – not just mothers – but also as mothers. At some point in the series, Wendy verges on villain, much like what happened to Walter in *Breaking Bad*. Similar to Walter, however, because audiences have had the opportunity to identify with Wendy, they are able to overlook her morally corrupt behavior, including putting Marty in harm's way in season three. Despite this, Wendy and Ruth are also admired by Marty, and because the audience has also connected with him, they are likely to take cues from this treatment. This is not the same for Skyler who is at odds with Walter by the end of the series: "It's a bad plan. I don't have any of your magic, Walt. I don't know what to do. I'm a coward. I—I can't go to the police, I can't stop laundering your money, I can't keep you out of this house, I can't even keep you out of my bed" (Johnson 2012).

6 YOU LIKE ME, YOU REALLY, REALLY LIKE ME

Finally, another reason whether or not an audience likes any antihero regardless of gender identity is if the narrative invokes relative morality. Mittell notes, "Antihero narratives regularly invoke *relative morality*, in which an ethically questionable character is juxtaposed with more explicitly villainous and unsympathetic characters to highlight the antihero's more redeeming qualities" (Mittell 2015, 143). In addition to juxtaposing these characters with "true" villains, female characters are often juxtaposed with their husbands – the male antihero of the series. Because of the writing, namely, the limited backstories in which the female characters are given, they are often cast as an obstacle to the series protagonist, the male antihero. This pattern is seen in many shows throughout the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s. (*The Sopranos*, *24*, *The Shield*, *Mad Men*, *The Walking Dead*, and *Ray Donovan*). However, this is not the case in *Ozark*.

Viewers often take cues from series protagonists on how they should feel about or treat other characters. For example, in *Breaking Bad*, from the beginning, the audience is encouraged to identify and sympathize with Walter. Without a doubt, *Breaking Bad* is ultimately his story. When Walter treats Skyler poorly, including calling her a bitch, the audience takes notes and responds in a similar matter. (It has been widely noted how much fans of the show despised Skyler – including posts on the show's own message boards).

On the other hand, Wendy is admired by many characters throughout the series: Marty, Navarro, and Helen. Because many viewers are likely to see Marty as the "true" antihero in *Ozark*, they like him – whoever Marty respects, viewers do. When Skyler had an idea, she was also quickly chastised by Walter. Navarro, the head of the drug cartel, ensures that Wendy does not receive the same fate. For example, after being kidnapped by Navarro, Marty is asked why we would spy on his wife. Navarro claims, "You fear her because you don't understand her" (Dabis 2020a). Navarro reminds Marty that Wendy knows what she wants, and she wants it all. This reminds Marty and the audience of her agency. In addition to Wendy, Ruth is also revered by Marty throughout the series. Throughout the three seasons, she is also, at times, revered by her cousins, Wyatt and Three. Ultimately, audiences take note of this respect.

Additionally, despite disagreeing on numerous occasions, there are times in the series when Marty is openly impressed with both Ruth's and Wendy's ideas and shows, despite their disagreements, just how much he appreciates her. At the end of season three, when Wendy is reeling, Marty states, "Wendy, you're our whole life." At the end of the conversation, he pleads, "Baby, come home and let me take care of you" (Sakharov 2020b). Despite all of their conflict, Marty still clearly admires and love Wendy, telling her numerous times within that one episode. These moments are important. For viewers who identified more with Marty, they are likely to take cues from this treatment. When Marty is sympathetic

toward Wendy, viewers who identify more with him are more likely to do so as well. We never really have this moment in other series like *Breaking Bad*, which is one of the handful of reasons Skyler is unable to achieve antihero status.

7 THE RISE OF THE FEMALE ANTIHERO

In *Ozark*, we see two female antiheroes: Wendy Byrde and Ruth Langmore. Unlike female characters in other series, these two are able to achieve antihero status because the audience is given time to connect with these women as people; they are more than someone's wife, mother, sister, or cousin. They are critical to the overall arch of the series. As noted above, both women have agency; their decisions are often independent from the male protagonist who is also an antihero. Wendy and Ruth make decisions about their shared business, their lives, and their families throughout the three seasons. Their behavior is not merely a reaction to Marty's behavior.

Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, they are not juxtaposed with Marty; rather, they work with Marty and because they have agency, occasionally against. Both Wendy and Ruth have a backstory, and their backstories tap into some common lived experiences, including grieving the loss of a child, managing post-partum depression, and caring for one's parents and relatives. These are themes in which many viewers can relate, and because they can relate, many viewers are willing to overlook some of their morally ambiguous behavior, including behavior that puts their families in danger. The creators of *Ozark* allow plenty of time and space for viewers to connect with these two characters, and it is worth repeating that connecting with characters is often the first step to *liking* characters. In ADT research on antiheroes, Raney, Hannah Schmid-Petri, Julia Niemann, Michael Ellensohn (2009) note that "we extend the boundaries of what is in moral terms typically

allowable or tolerable because we like certain characters so much and we want to continue liking them." This is what essentially happens in *Ozark*.

Additionally, as noted, women are often disempowered through motherhood, as the morally ambiguous traits often associated with antiheroes run counter to how society defines a "good" mother. Unlike *Breaking Bad*, however, *Ozark* is able to forgo this gender role stereotyping by providing its two female leads with respect. At times, each character makes terrible choices in regard to parenting; choices, if made by Skyler White, likely would be criticized by the audience. In *Ozark*, however, motherhood is shown in such a way that these choices, terrible as they may be, help push back against gender role stereotyping by tackling many of the issues facing mothers today such as work-life balance issues. These choices help the viewer empathize with Wendy and Ruth. It increases their likability.

It is worth noting that other series have recently featured female antiheroes, series such as AMC's *Better Call Saul* (a prequal to *Breaking Bad*) and NBC's *Good Girls*. In *Better Call Saul*, Saul Goodman and Kim Wexler are lead characters and, both arguably, antiheroes. Kim's character development is similar to Wendy's because as the series progresses, the audience learns more about her backstory. This increases the chance that the audience will like her and thus accept her, at times, morally ambiguous behavior. Unlike *Breaking Bad*, the audience may even choose to blame Saul (a corrupt lawyer who usually cuts corners) for Kim's bad behavior because they know more about her character (a hardworking lawyer who usually plays by the rules). This simply was not the case in *Breaking Bad*, as the audience knew very little about Skyler and Skyler's personality before Walter's drug empire started. Interestingly, in *Good Girls*, there are no primary male antiheroes in which to juxtapose the female antiheroes. This is important to note, as the audience cannot take cues from a male antihero nor do they feel as though they must choose between the two.

All the characters discussed (from *Ozark* to *Better Call Saul* to *Good Girls*) are treated well by other key characters throughout the series, making it more likely that audiences will view them in the same light. Because many of these characters are admired by other characters, the audience members take cues from their treatment of Wendy and Ruth. While there are some similarities between *Breaking Bad* and *Ozark*, namely how an "average" middle-aged man can quickly descend into drug culture, there are also some vast differences. The rise of these series is worthy of further query and discussion. The way in which female characters are developed is one of the primary differences and reasons why Wendy and Ruth, unlike Skyler, are able to achieve antihero status. This is why what happens in the writing room and those who occupy it are so important.

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9 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.